

JANUARY, 1963

AMAZING STORIES Fact and Science Fiction

VOL. 37 NO. 1

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IT COULD BE ANYTHING
by Keith Laumer

CEREBRUM



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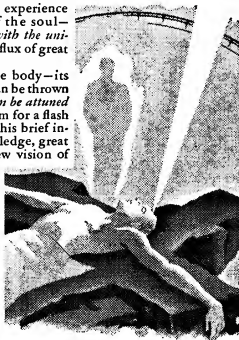
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Amazing

Fact and Science Fiction Stories

JANUARY, 1963

Vol. 37, No. 1

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EDITORIAL

LET a science-fiction (or even science fact) writer make a suggestion these days, and almost before the words are out of his typewriter the suggestion has become fact. One would almost think there were telepaths loose. When Ben Bova turned in his fascinating article on meteoritic evidence for life in outer space (which appears on P. 66 of this issue), he said, in a covering note to the editors:

"The practical implications of the meteor controversy and its 'fallout' of theories should have a decided effect on the nation's space program. Within 5 to 8 years Americans will be walking on the moon. Among the first men there should be a biochemist with the equipment to sample the lunar surface and subsoil for evidence of life."

Now it seems that Ben was slightly wrong—or, at least, behind the times. A biochemist will not necessarily be required, for an Air Force scientist has just developed a device which will not only identify alien life, but be able to determine the biological properties of specimens gathered on extra-terrestrial bodies.

The name of the device has the ring of science-fiction's age of wonder: it is called a "bio-tele-scanner." Its inventor is Dr. William G. Glenn, a research immunobiologist with the School of Aerospace Medicine in Texas.

Future astronauts will merely take a sample of soil or plant life or animal tissue and put it in a glass tube two inches high and one-eighth of an inch wide. The tube goes into one of 50 numbered spaces inside the bio-tele-scanner. An electronic device translates the contents of the tube into a code and telemeters the data to an Earth laboratory. There the nature of the alien substance is converted into a tracing on a graph and, from the distinctive characteristics revealed by the pattern, a Terran biologist will be able to make an intelligent appraisal of the chemical properties of the sample.

How does it work? Each of the tiny tubes contains a jelly-like material that reacts in a known way with specific biological substances. As the alien specimen diffuses gradually into the jelly-like substance, the reactions be-

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CEREBRUM

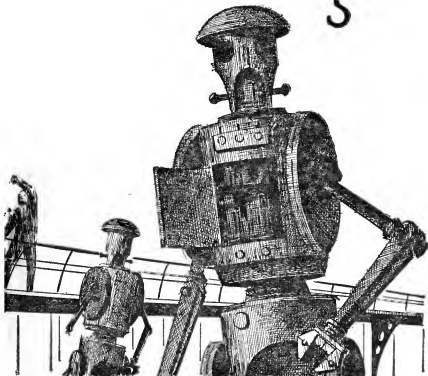
By ALBERT TEICHNER

*For thousands of years the big brain served as a
master switchboard for the thoughts
and emotions of humanity.
Now the central mind was showing signs of decay
. . . and men went mad.*



THE trouble began in a seemingly trivial way. Connor had wanted to speak to Rhoda, his wife, wished himself onto a trunk line and then waited. "Dallas Shipping here, Mars and points Jupiterward, at your service," said a business-is-business, unwifely voice in his mind.

"I was not calling you," he thought back into the line, now also getting a picture, first flat, then properly 3-D and in color. It was a paraNormally luxurious commercial office.



"I am the receptionist at Dallas Shipping," the woman thought back firmly. "You rang and I answered."

"I'm sure I rang right," Connor insisted.

"And I'm sure I know my job," Dallas Shipping answered. "I have received as many as five hundred thought messages a day, some of them highly detailed and technical and—"

"Forget it," snapped Connor. "Let's say I focussed wrong."

He pulled back and twenty seconds later finally had Rhoda on the line. "Queerest thing happened," he projected. "I just got a wrong party."

"Nothing queer about it," his wife smiled, springing to warm life on his inner eye. "You just weren't concentrating, Connor."

"Don't you hand me that too," he grumbled. "I *know* I thought on the right line into Central. Haven't I been using the System for sixty years?"

"Exactly—all habit and no attention."

How smugly soothing she was some days! "I think the trouble's in Central itself. The Switcher isn't receiving me clearly."

"Lately I've had some peculiar miscalls myself," Rhoda said nervously. "But you *can't* blame Central Switching!"

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" By now he was equally nervous and only too happy to end the conver-

sation. Ordinarily communications were not monitored but if this one had been there could certainly be a slander complaint.

ON his way home in the monorail Connor tried to reach his office and had the frightening experience of having his telepathic call refused by Central. Then he refused in turn to accept a call being projected at him, but when an Urgent classification was added he had to take it. "For your unfounded slander of Central Switching's functioning," announced the mechanically-synthesized voice, "you are hereby Suspended indefinitely from the telepathic net. From this point on all paraNormal privileges are withdrawn and you will be able to communicate with your fellow only in person or by written message."

Stunned, Connor looked about at his fellow passengers. Most of them had their eyes closed and their faces showed the mild little smile which was the outer hallmark of a mind at rest, tuned in to a music channel or some other of the hundreds of entertainment lines available from Central. How much he had taken that for granted just a few minutes ago!

Three men, more shabbily dressed, were unsmilingly reading books. They were fellow pariahs, Suspended for one reason or another from paraNormal

privileges. Only the dullest, lowest-paying jobs were available to them while anyone inside the System could have Central read any book and transmit the information directly into his cortex. The shabbiest one of all looked up and his sympathetic glance showed that he had instantly grasped Connor's changed situation.

Connor looked hastily away; he didn't want any sympathy from that kind of 'human' being! Then he shuddered. Wasn't he, himself, now that kind in every way except his ability to admit it?

When he stepped onto the lushly hydroponic platform at the suburban stop the paraNormals, ordinarily friendly, showed that they, too, already realized what had happened. Each pair of suddenly icy eyes went past him as if he were not there at all.

He walked up the turf-covered lane toward his house, feeling hopelessly defeated. How would he manage to maintain a home here in the middle of green and luxuriant beauty? More people than ever were now outside the System for one reason or another and most of these unfortunates were crowded in metropolitan centers which were slumhells to anyone who had known something better.

How could he have been so thoughtless because of a little

lapse in Central's mechanism? Now that it was denied him, probably forever, he saw more clearly the essential perfection of the system that had brought order into the chaos following the discovery of universal para-Normal capacities. At first there had been endless interference between minds trying to reach each other while fighting off unwanted calls. Men had even suggested this blessing turned curse be annulled.

The Central Synaptic Computation Receptor and Transmitter System had ended all such negative thinking. For the past century and a half it had neatly routed telepathic transmissions with an efficiency that made ancient telephone exchanges look like Stone Age toys. A mind could instantly exchange information with any other Subscribing mind and still shut itself off through the Central machine if and when it needed privacy. Except, he shuddered once more, if Central put that Urgent rating on a call. Now only Rhoda could get a job to keep them from the inner slumlands.

He turned into his garden and watched Max, the robot, spading in the petunia bed. The chrysanthemums really needed more attention and he was going to think the order to Max when he realized with a new shock that all orders would have to be oral now.

He gave up the idea of saying anything and stomped gloomily into the house.

AS he hung his jacket in the hall closet he heard Rhoda coming downstairs. "Queer thing happened today," he said with forced cheerfulness, "but we'll manage." He stopped as Rhoda appeared. Her eyes were red and puffed.

"I tried to reach you," she sobbed.

"Oh, you already know. Well, we can manage, you know, honey. You can work two days a week and—"

"You don't understand," she screamed at him. "I'm Suspended too! I tried to tell it I hadn't done anything but it said I was guilty by being associated with you."

Stunned, he fell back into a chair. "Not you, too, darling!" He had been getting used to the idea of his own reduced status but this was too brutal. "Tell Central you'll leave me and the guilt will be gone."

"You fool, I did say that and my defense was refused!"

Tears welled in his eyes. Was there no bottom to this horror? "You yourself suggested that?"

"Why shouldn't I?" she cried. "It wasn't my fault at all."

He sat there and tried not to listen as waves of hate rolled over him. Then the front bell rang and Rhoda answered it.

"I haven't been able to reach you," someone was saying through the door. It was Sheila Williams who lived just down the lane. "Lately lines seem to get tied up more and more. It's about tonight's game."

Just then Rhoda opened the door and Sheila came to an abrupt halt as she saw her old friend's face. Her expression turned stony and she said, "I wanted you to know the game is off." Then she strode away.

Unbelieving, Rhoda watched her go. "After forty years!" she exclaimed. She slowly came back to her husband and stared down at him. "Forty years of 'undying' friendship, gone like that!" Her eyes softened a little. "Maybe I'm wrong, Connor, maybe I said too much through Central myself. And maybe I'd have acted like Sheila if *they* had been the ones."

He withdrew his hands from his face. "I've done the same thing to other wretches myself. We'll just have to get used to it somehow. I've enough social credits to hang on here a year anyway."

"Get used to it," she repeated dully. This time there was no denunciation but she had to flee up the stairs to be alone.

He went to the big bay window and, trying to keep his mind blank, watched Max respading the petunia bed. He really should

go out and tell the robot to stop, he decided, otherwise the same work would be repeated again and again. But he just watched for the next hour as Max kept returning to the far end of the bed and working his way up to the window, nodding mindlessly with each neat twist of his spade attachment.

Rhoda came back downstairs and said, "It's six-thirty. The first time since the boys left that they didn't call us at six." He thought of Ted on Mars and Phil on Venus and sighed. "By now," she went on, "they know what's happened. Usually colonial children just refuse to have anything more to do with parents like us. And they're right—they have their own futures to consider."

"They'll still write to us," he started reassuring her but she had already gone outside where he could hear her giving Max vocal instructions for preparing dinner. Which was just as well—she would know the truth soon enough. Without a doubt the boys were now also guilty by association and they'd have nothing left to lose by maintaining contact.

At dinner, though, he felt less kindly toward her and snapped a few times. Then it was Rhoda's turn to exercise forbearance and to try to smooth things over. Once she looked out the picture window at the perfect synthetic thatch of the Williams' great

cottage, peeping over the holly-hock-topped rise of ground at the end of the garden. "Well?" he demanded. "Well?"

"Nothing, Connor."

"You sighed and I want to know what the devil—"

"Since you insist—I was thinking how lucky Sheila Williams always is. Ten years ago the government authorized twins for her while I haven't had a child in thirty years, and now our disaster forewarns her. She'll never get caught off guard on a paraNormal line."

HE snapped his fingers and Max brought out the pudding in a softly shining silver bowl. Above it hovered a bluish halo of flaming brandy. "Maybe not. I've heard of people even being Suspended without a reason." He slowly savored the first spoonful as if it might be the last ever. From now on every privileged pleasure would have that special value. "One more year of such delights."

"If we can stand the ostracism."

"We can." Suddenly he was all angry determination. "I did the wrong thing today, admitted, but it really was the truth, what I said. I've concentrated right and still got wrong numbers!"

"Me too, but I kept thinking it was my own fault."

"The real truth's that while

the System assumes more authority each decade it keeps getting less efficient."

"Well, why doesn't the government do something, get everything back in working order?"

His grin showed no pleasure. "Do you know anybody who could help repair a Master Central Computer?"

"Not personally but there must be—."

"Must be nothing! People are slack from having it so good, don't think as much as they used to. Why bother when you can tap Central for any information? Almost any information."

"How can it all end?"

"Who knows and who cares?" He was angry all over again. "It will still be working well enough for a few centuries and we, we're just left out in the cold! I'm only ninety, I can live another sixty years, and you, you're going to have a good seventy-five more of this deprivation."

Max was standing at the foot of the table, metal visual lids closed as he waited for instructions. Rhoda considered him unthinkingly, then snapped back to attention. "Nothing more, Max, go to the kitchen and disconnect until you hear from us."

"Yes," he said in that programmed tone which indicated endless gratitude for the privilege of half-being.

"That ends my sad day," Con-

ner sighed. "I'm taking a black-out pill and intend to stay that way for the next fourteen hours."

* * *

THE next morning he rode into the city in the same car as the one that had brought him back the day before. None of the regulars even deigned to look in his direction. There was another change today. Only two fellow Suspendeds were reading their books even though there had been three for the past few months. Which meant another one had exhausted his income and was being forced into the inner city.

At the office none of Conner's associates greeted him. They didn't even have to contrast the new tension in his face with the easy-going, flannelled contentment of their fellows. Undoubtedly somebody had tried to reach him or Rhoda and heard the Suspension Notice on their severed thoughtlines.

As was also to be expected, there was a notice on his desk that his executive services would no longer be needed.

He quickly gathered up his personal things and went downstairs, passing through the office workers pool. Miss Wilson, his Suspended secretary, came up to him. She looked saddened yet, curiously, almost triumphant too. "We all heard the bad news this morning," she said,

her blue eyes never wavering. "We want you to know how sorry we are since you're not accustomed—."

"I'll never be accustomed to it," he said bitterly.

"No, Mr. Newman, you mustn't think that way. Human beings can get accustomed to whatever's necessary."

"Necessary? Not in my books!"

"Some day you may feel differently. I was born into a Suspended family and we've managed. Being on the outside has its compensations."

"Such as?"

"We-l-l—," she faltered, "I really don't know exactly. But you must have faith it will be so." She pulled out a card from a pocket of her sheath dress. "Maybe you'll want to use this some day."

He glanced at the card which said, *John Newbridge, Doctor at Mind, 96th Level, Harker Building, Appointments by Writing Only*. There was no thought-line coding.

"I have no doubt," he muttered. But she was starting to look hurt so he carefully slid the card into his wallet.

"He's very helpful," she said. "I mean, helpful for people who have adjustment problems."

"You're a good girl," he said huskily. "Maybe we'll meet someday again. I'll have my wife call

—write to you so you can visit us before we have to come into the city."

"That," she smiled happily, "would be so wonderful, Mr. Newman. I've never been in a home like that." Then, choking with emotion, she turned and hurried away.

WHEN he reached home and told Rhoda what had happened, his wife was not in the least bit moved. "I'll never let that girl in my house," she said through thin lips. "A classless nothing! I'm going to keep my pride while I can."

There was some sense to her viewpoint but, he felt uncertainly, not enough for him to remain silent. "We have to adjust, darling, can't go on thinking we're what we're not."

"Why can't we?" she exploded. "I couldn't even order food today. Max had to go to the AutoMart and pick it up!"

"What are you trying to say?"

"That you made this mess!"

For a while he listened, dully unresponsive, but eventually the vituperation became too bitter and he came back at her with equal vigor. Until, weeping, she rushed upstairs once more.

That was the first of many arguments. Anything could bring them on, instructions for Max that she chose to consider erroneous, a biting statement from

him that she was deliberately making herself physically unattractive. More and more Rhoda took to going into the city while he killed time making crude, tentative adjustments on Max. What the devil, he occasionally wondered, could she be doing there?

But most of the time he did not bother about it; he had found a consolation of his own. At first it had been impossible to make the slightest changes in Max, even those that permitted the robot to remain conscious and give advice. Again and again his mind strained toward Central until the icy-edged truth cut into his brain—there was no line.

Out of boredom, though, he plugged away, walked past the disdainfully-staring eyes of neighbors to the village library, and withdrew dusty microfiles on robotics. Eventually he had acquired a little skill at contemplating what, essentially, remained a mystery to his easily-tired mind. It was not completely satisfactory but it would be enough to get him a better-than-average menial job when he had finally accepted his new condition.

At long last a letter came from Ted on Mars. It said:

Guilty by association, that's what I am! When it first happened I was furious with the two of you but resignation has its own consolations and I've given

up the ranting. Of course, I've lost my job and my new one will keep me from Earth a longer time but the real loss is not being able to think on Earth Central once a day. As you know, it's a funny civilization here anyway. As yet, there's no local telepathic Central but all Active Communicators are permitted to think in on Earth Central once a day—except for the big shots who can even telepath social engagements to each other by way of Earth! Privileged but a pretty dull crowd anyway.

Oh yes, another exception to the general ration, Suspendeds like me. Funny thing about that, seems to me there are more Suspended from the Earth System all the time. Maybe I'm imagining it.

As lovingly as ever, your son Ted (NO. *More* than ever!)

Rhoda really went to pieces for a while after that letter but, oddly enough, all recriminations soon stopped. She began going into the city every day and after each visit seemed a little calmer for having done so.

FINALLY Connor could no longer remain silent about it. But by now all conversations had to be broached by tactful beating around the bush so he began by saying he had decided to take a lower level job in the metropolis.

Rhoda was not surprised. "I know. A good idea but I think

you should wait a while longer and do something else first."

That made him suspicious. "Are you developing a new kind of unblockable ESP? How'd you know?"

"No," she laughed. "Some day we will maybe and people will use it better this time. But right now I'm just going by what I see. You've been studying Max and I knew you were bound to get restless." She became thoughtful. "What you really want to know, though, is what I've been doing in the city. Well, at first I did very little. I kept ending up in theatres where we Suspendeds can go. That gave a little relief. But since Ted's letter it's been different. I finally got up the courage to see Dr. Newbridge."

"Newbridge!"

"Connor, he's a great man. You should see him too."

"My mind may have smaller scope outside the System but what's left of it isn't cracking, Rhoda." Working himself into a spasm of righteous rage, he stalked out into the garden and tried to convince himself he was calmly studying the rose bushes' growth. But Sheila and Tony Williams came down the lane that skirted the garden and, as their eyes moved haughtily past him, his rage shifted its focus. He came back into the house and remained in sullen silence.

Rhoda went on as if there had been no interruption. "I still say Dr. Newbridge is a great man. He dropped out of the System of his own free will and that certainly took courage!"

"He willingly gave up his advantages and privileges?"

"Yes. And he's explained why to me. He felt it was destroying every Subscriber's ability to think and that it could not last. Some day we would be without anything to do our thinking and he wanted out."

Conner sat down and stared thoughtfully out the window. Max had just lumbered into the garden and, having unscrewed one hand to replace it with a flexible spade, was starting on the evening schedule for turning over the soil at the base of the plants. He would go methodically down one flower bed, then up the next one, until all had been worked over, then would start all over again unless ordered to stop. "Are we to end up the same way?" Connor shuddered. He slapped his knee. "All right, I'll go with you tomorrow. I've got to see what he's like—a man who'd voluntarily surrender ninety percent of his powers!"

* * *

THE next morning they rode into the city together and went to the Harker Building. It was in an area dense with non-telepaths, each one showing that

telltale cleft of anxiety in his forehead but briskly going about his business as if anxiety were actually a liveable quality. Newbridge had the same look but there was a nonetheless reassuring ease to the way he greeted them. He was tall and white-haired and his face frequently assumed an abstracted look as if his mind were reaching far away.

"You've come here," he said, "for two reasons. The first is dissatisfaction with your life. More precisely, you're dissatisfied with your attitude toward life but you wouldn't be willing to put it that way, not yet. Secondly, you want to know why anyone would willingly leave the System."

Connor leaned back in his chair. "That'll do for a starter."

"Right. Well, there aren't many anomalies like me but we do exist. Most people outside the System are there because they've been Suspended for supposed infractions, or they've been put out through guilt by association, or because they were born into a family already in that condition. Nothing like that happened to me. From early childhood I was trained by parents and teachers to discipline the projective potential of my mind into the System. Like every other paraNormal, I received my education by tapping Central for contact with

information centers and other minds. But I was a fluke." His dark blue eyes twinkled. "Biological units are never so standardized that *all* of them fall under any system that can be devised. I functioned in this System, true, but I could imagine my mind existing outside, could see my functioning *from the outside*. This is terribly rare—most people are limited to the functions which sustain them. They experience nothing else except when circumstances force them to. I, though, could see the System was not all-powerful."

"Not all-powerful!" Connor exploded. "It got rid of me awfully easily."

His wife tried to calm him. "Listen, dear, then decide."

"You're surviving as a pariah, Mr. Newman, aren't you? Your wife tells me you've even started to study robot controls, valuable knowledge for the future and personally satisfying now. Millions of people do survive as outsiders, as do the planetary colonists who only have limited access so far to social telepathy. The System has built into it defenses against Subscribers who lack confidence in it—if it didn't it would collapse. But people *in* the System are not forced to remain there. They can *will* themselves out any time they close their minds to it, as I did. But they don't want to will them-

selves out of it—you certainly didn't—and their comfortable inertia keeps everything going. I think you have to know a little about its history, a history which never would have interested you if you were still comfortably inside it."

He slowly outlined the way it had developed. First those uncertain steps toward understanding the universally latent powers of telepathy, then growing chaos as each individual spent most of his time fighting off unwanted messages. After a period of desperate discomfort a few great minds, made superhuman by their ability to tap each others' resources, had devised the Central System Switchboard. Only living units, delicately poised between rigid order and sheer chaos, could receive mental messages but this problem had been solved by the molecular biologists with their synthesized, self-replicating axons, vastly elongated and cunningly intertwined by the billions. These responded to every properly-modulated thought wave passing through them and made the same careful sortings as a human cell absorbing matter from the world. Then, to make certain this central mind would never become chaotic, there was programmed into it an automatic rejection of all sceptical challenges.

"That was the highest mo-

ment of our race," Newbridge sighed. "We had harnessed infinite complexities to our needs. But the success was too complete. Ever since then humanity has become more and more dependent on what was to be essentially a tool and nothing more. Each generation became lazier and there's no one alive who can keep this Central System in proper working order." He leaned forward to emphasize his point. "You see, it's very slowly breaking down. There's a steady accretion of inefficiency mutations in the axons and that's why more and more switching mistakes are being made—as in your case."

CONNOR was dazed by it all. "What's going to be the upshot, I mean, *how* is it going to break down?"

Newbridge threw up his hands. "I don't know—it's probably a long way off anyway. I guess the most likely thing is that more and more errors will accumulate and plenty of people will be Suspended just because Central is developing irrational quirks. Maybe the critical social mass for change will exist only when more are outside the System than inside. I suspect when that happens we'll be able to return to *direct* telepathic contact. As things are, our projection attempts are always blocked." A

buzzing sound came out of a small black box on the doctor's desk, startling Connor who in his executive days had received all such signals directly in his head. "Well, I've another patient waiting so this will have to be the end of our chat."

Connor and his wife exchanged glances. He said, "I'd like to come back. I'll probably have a twenty-hour week so I'll be in town a few days a week."

"More than welcome to come again," Newbridge grinned. "Just make the arrangements with Miss Richards, my nurse."

When they were in the street Rhoda asked, "Well, what do you think now?"

"I don't know what to think yet—but I do feel better. Rhoda, would you mind going home alone? I think I'll find a job right away."

"Mind?" she laughed. "It's wonderful news!"

After he left her he wandered around the city a while. In his paraNormal days he had never noticed them but it certainly was true that there were a lot of Suspendeds about. He studied some of them as he went along, trying to fathom their likes and dislikes by the way they moved and their expressions. But, unlike the paraNormals, each was different and it was impossible to see deeply into them.

Then, as he rounded a corner,

he was suddenly face to face with his new enemy. A large flat park stood before him and there in the middle was a hundred-story tower of smooth seamless material, the home of the Central System's brain. There were smaller towers at many points in the world but this was the most important, capable of receiving on its mile-long axons, antennas of the very soul itself, every thought projected at it from any point in the solar system. The housing gleamed blindingly in the sun of high noon, as perfect as the day it had been completed. That surface was designed to repel all but the most unusual of the radiation barrages that could bring on subtle changes in the brain within. The breakdown, he thought bitterly, would take too many centuries to consider.

He turned away and headed into an Employment Exchange. The man behind the desk there was a Suspended, too, and showed himself to be sympathetically understanding as soon as he studied the application form. "ParaNormal until a few months ago," he nodded. "Tough change to make, I guess."

Connor managed a little grin. "Maybe I'll be grateful it happened some day."

"A curious thought, to say the least." He glanced down the application again. "Always some kind of work available although

there do seem to be more Suspendeds all the time. Robot repair—that's good! Always a shortage there."

So Connor went to work in a large building downtown along with several hundred other men whose principal duty was overseeing the repair of robot servitors by other servitors and rectifying any minor errors that persisted. He was pleased to find that, while some of his fellow workmen knew much more about the work than he did, there were as many who knew less. But the most pleasing thing of all was the way they cooperated with one another. They could not reach directly into each other's minds but the very denial of this power gave them a sense of common need.

HE visited Newbridge once a week and that, too, proved increasingly helpful. As time went on, he found he was spending less of it regretting what he had lost. But once in a while a paraNormal came through the workshop, eyes moving past the Suspendeds as if they did not exist and the old resentment would return in all its bitterness. And when he himself did not feel this way he could still sense it in men around him.

"Perfectly natural way to feel," Rhoda said, "not that it serves any purpose."

"It's paraNormal lack of reaction," he tried to explain, "that's what really bothers me. They don't even bother to notice our hatred because we have the strength of insects next to their's. They can all draw on each others' resources and that totals to infinitely more than any of us have, even if as individuals they're so much less. The perfect form of security."

But for a moment one day that security seemed to be collapsing. Above the work floor in Connor's factory there was a gallery of small but luxurious offices in which the executive staff of paraNormals 'worked.' None of them came in more than two days a week but use of these offices was rotated among them so all were ordinarily occupied and workers, going upstairs to the stock depot, could see paraNormals in various stages of relaxation. Usually the paraNormal kept his feet on a desk rest and, eyes closed, contemplated incoming entertainment. On rarer occasions he would be leaning over a document on the desk as his mind received the proper decision from Central.

This particular morning Connor was feeling bitterly envious as he went by the offices. He had already seen seven smugly-similar faces when he came by Room Eight. Suddenly the face of its occupant contorted in agony,

then the man got up and paced about as if in a trap. Deciding he had seen more than was good for him, Connor hurried on. But the man in Nine was acting out the same curious drama. He quickly retraced his steps, passing one scene of consternation after another, and went back down to the work floor, wondering what it all meant.

Soon everybody knew something extraordinary was afoot as all the paraNormals swarmed noisily onto the runway overlooking the floor. They were shouting wordless sounds at each other, floundering about as they did so. Then, with equal suddenness, everything was calm again and, faces more relaxed, they went back into their offices.

That evening Connor heard the same story everywhere—for ten minutes all paraNormals had gone berserk. On the monorail he noticed that, though still more relaxed than their unwelcome fellows, they no longer exuded that grating *absolute* sense of security. No doubt about it—for a few minutes something had gone wrong, completely wrong, with the Central System. "I don't like it," Rhoda said. "Let's see Dr. Newbridge tomorrow."

"I'll bet it's a good sign."

Newbridge, though, was also worried when they got to see him. "They're losing some of their self-confidence," he said,

"and that means they're going to start noticing us. Figure it out, Newman, about one-third the population of Earth—nobody can get exact figures—is outside the System. The paraNormals will want to reduce our numbers if more breakdowns take place. I'll have to go into hiding soon."

"But why you of all people?" Connor protested.

"Because I and a few thousand others like me represent not only an alternative way of life—all Suspendeds do that—but we possess more intensive knowledge for rehabilitating society after Central's collapse. That collapse may come much sooner than we've been expecting. When it does we're going to have enormous hordes of paras milling around, helplessly waiting to learn how to think for themselves again. Well, when we finally reach the telepath stage next time we'll have to manage it better." He took out an envelope. "If anything happens to me, this contains the names of some people you're to contact."

"Why don't you come to our place now?" asked Rhoda. "We'll still be able to hold it for a few more months."

"Can't go yet, too many things to clear up. But maybe later." He rose and extended his hand to them. "Anyway it's a kind—and brave—offer."

"Sounds overly melodramatic

to me," Connor said when they were outside. "Who'd want to harm a psychiatric worker with no knowledge except what's in his head and his personal library?"

BUT he stopped harping on the point when they reached the monorail station. Three Sus-pendeds, obviously better educated than most, were being led away by a large group of para-Normals. The paraNormals had their smug expressions back but there was a strange gleam of determination in their eyes. "Sometimes life itself gets overly melodramatic," Rhoda said nervously.

The possible fate of these arrested men haunted him all the way home as did the hostile stares of the people in the monorail car. At home, though, there was the momentary consolation of a pair of letters from the boys. There was little information in them but they did at least convey in every line love for their parents.

But even this consolation did not last long. Why, Connor muttered to himself, did they have to wait for letters when telephone and radio systems could have eased their loneliness so much more effectively? Because the paras did not need such systems and their needs were the only ones that mattered! His fingers itched to achieve something

more substantial than the work, now childishly routine, that he was doing at the factory. Just from studying Max he knew he could devise such workable communication systems. But all that was idle daydreaming—it wouldn't be in his lifetime.

The next morning Rhoda insisted they go back into the city to try once more to persuade Newbridge to leave. When they arrived at the Harker Building it seemed strangely quiet. The few people who were about kept avoiding each others' glances and they found themselves alone in the elevator to the 96th level. But Miss Richards, the doctor's nurse-secretary, was standing in the corridor as they got out. She was trembling and found it difficult to talk. "Don't—don't go in," she stuttered. "No help now."

He pushed past her, took one glance at the fire-charred consulting room where a few blackened splinters of bone remained and turned away, leading the two women to the elevator. At first Miss Richards did not want to go but he forced her to come along. "You have to get away from here—can't do any good for him now."

She sucked in air desperately, blinked back her tears and nodded. "There was another ten-minute breakdown this morning. A lot of paraNormals panicked

and a vigilante pack came here to fire-blast the Doctor. They said I'd be next if things got any worse."

Connor pinched his forehead to hold back his own anguish, then pulled out a sheet of paper. "Dr. Newbridge was afraid of something like this. He gave me a list of names."

"I know, Mr. Newman, I know them by heart."

"Shouldn't we try to contact one of them?"

As they came out into the street, she stopped and thought a moment. "Crane would be the easiest to reach. He's an untitled psychiatrist and one of the alternate leaders for the underground."

"Underground?"

"Oh, they tried to be prepared for every eventual—."

"It's impossible!" Rhoda broke in. She had been looking up and down the great avenue as they talked. "There isn't one person in the street, not one!"

An abandoned robot cab stood at the curb and he threw open the door. "Come on, get in! Something's happening. Miss Richards, set it for this Crane's address."

The cab started to shoot uptown, turning a corner into another deserted boulevard. As it skirted the great Park, he pointed at Central Tower. There seemed to be a slight crack in

the smooth surface half way up but, as a moment's mist engulfed the tower, it looked flawless again. Then all the mist was gone and the crack was back, a little larger than before.

CONNOR leaned forward and set the cab for top speed as they rounded into the straightaway of another uptown street. Occasionally they caught glimpses of frightened faces, clumped in lobby entrances, and once two bodies came flying out of a window far ahead. "They're killing our people everywhere," moaned the nurse.

As they approached the crushed forms, Connor slowed down a little. "They're dressed too well—what's left of them. They're paraNormals!"

A minute later they were at the large apartment block where Crane lived. They entered the building through a lobby jammed with more silent people. All were Suspendeds.

At first Crane did not want to let the trio in but when he recognized Newbridge's nurse he unlocked the heavily-bolted door. He was a massively-built man with dark eyes set deeply beneath a jutting brow and the eyes did not blink as Miss Richards told him what had happened. "We'll miss him," he said, then turned abruptly on Connor. "Have you any skills?"

"Robotics," he answered.

The great head nodded as Connor told of his experience at work and on Max. "Good, we're going to need people like you for rebuilding." He pulled a radio sender and receiver from a cabinet and held an earphone close to his temple, continuing to nod. Then he put it down again. "I know what you're going to say —illegal, won't work and all that. Well, a few of us have been waiting for the chance to build our own communication web and now we can do it."

"I just want to know why you keep mentioning *our* rebuilding. They're more likely to destroy all of us in their present mood."

"Us?" He took them to the window and pointed toward the harbor where thousands of black specks were tumbling into the water. "They're destroying themselves! Some jumping from buildings but most pouring toward the sea, a kind of oceanic urge to escape completely from themselves, to bury themselves in something infinitely bigger than their separate hollow beings. Before they were more like contented robots. Now they're more like suicidal lemmings because they can't exist without this common brain to which they've given so little and from which they've taken so much."

Connor squared his shoulders.

"We'll have **our work cut out for** us. Dr. Newbridge saw it all coming, you d'd too."

"Not quite," Crane sighed. "We assumed that at the time of **complete** breakdown the System would open up, throwing all the Subscribers out of it, leaving them disconnected from each other and waiting for our help. But it worked out in just the opposite manner!"

"You mean that the System is staying closed as it breaks down? Like a telephone exchange in which all the lines remained connected and every call went to all telephones."

"Exactly," Crane replied.

"I don't understand this technical talk," Rhoda protested, watching in hypnotized horror as the speck swarm swelled ever larger in the sea.

"I'll put it this way," Crane explained. "Their only hope was to have time to develop the desire for release from the System as it died. But they are dying *inside* it. You see, Mrs. Newman, every thought in every paraNormal's head, every notion, every image, no matter how stupidly trivial, is now pouring into every other paraNormal's head. They're over-communicating to the point where there's nothing left to communicate but death itself!"

THE END

By KEITH LAUMER

it could be ANYTHING

*Keith Laumer, well-known for his tales of adventure
and action, shows us a different side of his talent
in this original, exciting and thought-provoking
exploration of the meaning of meaning.*

Illustrated by FINLAY



SHE'LL be pulling out in a minute, Brett," Mr. Phillips said. He tucked his railroader's watch back in his vest pocket. "You better get aboard—if you're still set on going."

"It was reading all them books done it," Aunt Haicey said. "Thick books, and no pictures in them. I knew it'd make trouble." She plucked at the faded hand-embroidered shawl over her thin shoulders, a tiny bird-like woman with bright anxious eyes.

"Don't worry about me," Brett said. "I'll be back."



"The place'll be yours when I'm gone," Aunt Haicey said. "Lord knows it won't be long."

"Why don't you change your mind and stay on, boy?" Mr. Phillips said, blinking up at the young man. "If I talk to Mr. J.D., I think he can find a job for you at the plant."

"So many young people leave Casperton," Aunt Haicey said. "They never come back."

Mr. Phillips clicked his teeth. "They write, at first," he said. "Then they gradually lose touch."

"All your people are here, Brett," Aunt Haicey said. "Haven't you been happy here?"

"Why can't you young folks be content with Casperton?" Mr. Phillips said. "There's everything you need here."

"It's that Pretty-Lee done it," Aunt Haicey said. "If it wasn't for that girl—"

A clatter ran down the line of cars. Brett kissed Aunt Haicey's dry cheek, shook Mr. Phillips' hand, and swung aboard. His suitcase was on one of the seats. He put it up above in the rack, and sat down, turned to wave back at the two old people.

It was a summer morning. Brett leaned back and watched the country slide by. It was nice country, Brett thought; mostly in corn, some cattle, and away in the distance the hazy blue hills. Now he would see what was on the other side of them: the cities,

the mountains, and the ocean. Up until now all he knew about anything outside of Casperton was what he'd read or seen pictures of. As far as he was concerned, chopping wood and milking cows back in Casperton, they might as well not have existed. They were just words and pictures printed on paper. But he didn't want to just read about them. He wanted to see for himself.

PRETTY-LEE hadn't come to see him off. She was probably still mad about yesterday. She had been sitting at the counter at the Club Rexall, drinking a soda and reading a movie magazine with a big picture of an impossibly pretty face on the cover—the kind you never see just walking down the street. He had taken the next stool and ordered a coke.

"Why don't you read something good, instead of that pap?" he asked her.

"Something good? You mean something dry, I guess. And don't call it . . . that word. It doesn't sound polite."

"What does it say? That somebody named Doll Starr is fed up with glamor and longs for a simple home in the country and lots of kids? Then why doesn't she move to Casperton?"

"You wouldn't understand," said Pretty-Lee.

He took the magazine, leafed

through it. "Look at this: all about people who give parties that cost thousands of dollars, and fly all over the world having affairs with each other and committing suicide and getting divorced. It's like reading about Martians."

"I still like to read about the stars. There's nothing wrong with it."

"Reading all that junk just makes you dissatisfied. You want to do your hair up crazy like the pictures in the magazines and wear weird-looking clothes—"

Pretty-Lee bent her straw double. She stood up and took her shopping bag. "I'm very glad to know you think my clothes are weird—"

"You're taking everything I say personally. Look." He showed her a full-color advertisement on the back cover of the magazine. "Look at this. Here's a man supposed to be cooking steaks on some kind of back-yard grill. He looks like a movie star; he's dressed up like he was going to get married; there's not a wrinkle anywhere. There's not a spot on that apron. There isn't even a grease spot on the frying pan. The lawn is as smooth as a billiard table. There's his son; he looks just like his pop, except that he's not grey at the temples. Did you ever really see a man that handsome, or hair that was just silver over the ears and the

rest glossy black? The daughter looks like a movie starlet, and her mom is exactly the same, except that she has that grey streak in front to match her husband. You can see the car in the drive; the treads of the tires must have just been scrubbed; they're not even dusty. There's not a pebble out of place; all the flowers are in full bloom; no dead ones. No leaves on the lawn; no dry twigs showing on the trees. That other house in the background looks like a palace, and the man with the rake, looking over the fence: he looks like this one's twin brother, and he's out raking leaves in brand new clothes—"

Pretty-Lee grabbed her magazine. "You just seem to hate everything that's nicer than this messy town—"

"I don't think it's nicer. I like you; your hair isn't always perfectly smooth, and you've got a mended place on your dress, and you feel human, you smell human—"

"Oh!" Pretty-Lee turned and flounced out of the drug store.

BRETT shifted in the dusty plush seat and looked around. There were a few other people in the car. An old man was reading a newspaper; two old ladies whispered together. There was a woman of about thirty with a mean-looking kid;

and some others. They didn't look like magazine pictures, any of them. He tried to picture them doing the things you read in newspapers: the old ladies putting poison in somebody's tea; the old man giving orders to start a war. He thought about babies in houses in cities, and airplanes flying over, and bombs falling down: huge explosive bombs. Blam! Buildings fall in, pieces of glass and stone fly through the air. The babies are blown up along with everything else—

But the kind of people he knew couldn't do anything like that. They liked to loaf and eat and talk and drink beer and buy a new tractor or refrigerator and go fishing. And if they ever got mad and hit somebody—afterwards they were embarrassed and wanted to shake hands. . . .

The train slowed, came to a shuddery stop. Through the window he saw a cardboard-looking building with the words BAXTER'S JUNCTION painted across it. There were a few faded posters on a bulletin board. An old man was sitting on a bench, waiting. The two old ladies got off and a boy in blue jeans got on. The train started up. Brett folded his jacket and tucked it under his head and tried to doze off. . . .

* * *

Brett awoke, yawned, sat up.

The train was slowing. He remembered you couldn't use the toilets while the train was stopped. He got up and went to the end of the car. The door was jammed. He got it open and went inside and closed the door behind him. The train was going slower, clack-clack . . . clack-clack . . . clack; clack . . . cuh-lack . . .

He washed his hands, then pulled at the door. It was stuck. He pulled harder. The handle was too small; it was hard to get hold of. The train came to a halt. Brett braced himself and strained against the door. It didn't budge.

He looked out the grimy window. The sun was getting lower. It was about three-thirty, he guessed. He couldn't see anything but some dry-looking fields.

Outside in the corridor there were footsteps. He started to call, but then didn't. It would be too embarrassing, pounding on the door and yelling, "Let me out! I'm stuck in the toilet . . ."

He tried to rattle the door. It didn't rattle. Somebody was dragging something heavy past the door. Mail bags, maybe. He'd better yell. But dammit, the door couldn't be all that hard to open. He studied the latch. All he had to do was turn it. He got a good grip and twisted. Nothing.

He heard the mail bag bump-bump, and then another one. To heck with it; he'd yell. He'd wait

until he heard the footsteps pass the door again and then he'd make some noise.

Brett waited. It was quiet now. He rapped on the door anyway. No answer. Maybe there was nobody left in the car. In a minute the train would start up and he'd be stuck here until the next stop. He banged on the door. "Hey! The door is stuck!"

It sounded foolish. He listened. It was very quiet. He pounded again. The car creaked once. He put his ear to the door. He couldn't hear anything. He turned back to the window. There was no one in sight. He put his cheek flat against it, looked along the car. He saw only dry fields.

He turned around and gave the door a good kick. If he damaged it, it was too bad; the railroad shouldn't have defective locks on the doors. If they tried to make him pay for it, he'd tell them they were lucky he didn't sue the railroad . . .

HE braced himself against the opposite wall, drew his foot back, and kicked hard at the lock. Something broke. He pulled the door open.

He was looking out the open door and through the window beyond. There was no platform, just the same dry fields he could see on the other side. He came out and went along to his seat. The car was empty now.

He looked out the window. Why had the train stopped here? Maybe there was some kind of trouble with the engine. It had been sitting here for ten minutes or so now. Brett got up and went along to the door, stepped down onto the iron step. Leaning out, he could see the train stretching along ahead, one car, two cars—

There was no engine.

Maybe he was turned around. He looked the other way. There were three cars. No engine there either. He must be on some kind of siding . . .

Brett stepped back inside, and pushed through into the next car. It was empty. He walked along the length of it, into the next car. It was empty too. He went back through the two cars and his own car and on, all the way to the end of the train. All the cars were empty. He stood on the platform at the end of the last car, and looked back along the rails. They ran straight, through the dry fields, right to the horizon. He stepped down to the ground, went along the cinder bed to the front of the train, stepping on the ends of the wooden ties. The coupling stood open. The tall, dusty coach stood silently on its iron wheels, waiting. Ahead the tracks went on—

And stopped.

He walked along the ties, following the iron rails, shiny on top, and brown with rust on the

sides. A hundred feet from the train they ended. The cinders went on another ten feet and petered out. Beyond, the fields closed in. Brett looked up at the sun. It was lower now in the west, its light getting yellow and late-afternoonish. He turned and looked back at the train. The cars stood high and prim, empty, silent. He walked back, climbed in, got his bag down from the rack, pulled on his jacket. He jumped down to the cinders, followed them to where they ended. He hesitated a moment, then pushed between the knee-high stalks. Eastward across the field he could see what looked like a smudge on the far horizon.

He walked until dark, then made himself a nest in the dead stalks, and went to sleep.

HE lay on his back, looking up at pink dawn clouds. Around him, dry stalks rustled in a faint stir of air. He felt crumbly earth under his fingers. He sat up, reached out and broke off a stalk. It crumbled into fragile chips. He wondered what it was. It wasn't any crop he'd ever seen before.

He stood, looked around. The field went on and on, dead flat. A locust came whirring toward him, plumped to earth at his feet. He picked it up. Long elbowed legs groped at his fingers aimlessly. He tossed the insect in the

air. It fluttered away. To the east the smudge was clearer now; it seemed to be a grey wall, far away. A city? He picked up his bag and started on.

He was getting hungry. He hadn't eaten since the previous morning. He was thirsty too. The city couldn't be more than three hours' walk. He tramped along, the dry plants crackling under his feet, little puffs of dust rising from the dry ground. He thought about the rails, running across the empty fields, ending . . .

He had heard the locomotive groaning up ahead as the train slowed. And there had been feet in the corridor. Where had they gone?

He thought of the train, Casperton, Aunt Haicey, Mr. Phillips. They seemed very far away, something remembered from long ago. Up above the sun was hot. That was real. The rest seemed unimportant. Ahead there was a city. He would walk until he came to it. He tried to think of other things: television, crowds of people, money: the tattered paper and the worn silver—

Only the sun and the dusty plain and the dead plants were real now. He could see them, feel them. And the suitcase. It was heavy; he shifted hands, kept going.

There was something white on the ground ahead, a small shiny

surface protruding from the earth. Brett dropped the suitcase, went down on one knee, dug into the dry soil, pulled out a china teacup, the handle missing. Caked dirt crumbled away under his thumb, leaving the surface clean. He looked at the bottom of the cup. It was unmarked. Why just one teacup, he wondered, here in the middle of nowhere? He dropped it, took up his suitcase, and went on.

AFTER that he watched the ground more closely. He found a shoe; it was badly weathered, but the sole was good. It was a high-topped work shoe, size 10½-C. Who had dropped it here? He thought of other lone shoes he had seen, lying at the roadside or in alleys. How did they get there . . . ?

Half an hour later he detoured around the rusted front fender of an old-fashioned car. He looked around for the rest of the car but saw nothing. The wall was closer now; perhaps five miles more.

A scrap of white paper fluttered across the field in a stir of air. He saw another, more, blowing along in the fitful gusts. He ran a few steps, caught one, smoothed it out.

BUY NOW—PAY LATER!

He picked up another.

PREPARE TO MEET GOD

A third said:

WIN WITH WILLKIE

* * *

The wall loomed above him, smooth and grey. Dust was caked on his skin and clothes, and as he walked he brushed at himself absently. The suitcase dragged at his arm, thumped against his shin. He was very hungry and thirsty. He sniffed the air, instinctively searching for the odors of food. He had been following the wall for a long time, searching for an opening. It curved away from him, rising vertically from the level earth. Its surface was porous, undorned, too smooth to climb. It was, Brett estimated, twenty feet high. If there were anything to make a ladder from—

Ahead he saw a wide gate, flanked by grey columns. He came up to it, put the suitcase down, and wiped at his forehead with his handkerchief. Through the opening in the wall a paved street was visible, and the facades of buildings. Those on the street before him were low, not more than one or two stories, but behind them taller towers reared up. There were no people in sight; no sounds stirred the hot noon-time air. Brett picked up his bag and passed through the gate.

For the next hour he walked empty pavements, listening to the echoes of his footsteps against brownstone fronts, empty shop windows, curtained glass

doors, and here and there a vacant lot, weed-grown and desolate. He paused at cross streets, looked down long vacant ways. Now and then a distant sound came to him: the lonely honk of a horn, a faintly tolling bell, a clatter of hooves.

He came to a narrow alley that cut like a dark canyon between blank walls. He stood at its mouth, listening to a distant murmur, like a crowd at a funeral. He turned down the narrow way.

It went straight for a few yards, then twisted. As he followed its turnings the crowd noise gradually grew louder. He could make out individual voices now, an occasional word above the hubbub. He started to hurry, eager to find someone to talk to.

Abruptly the voices—hundreds of voices, he thought—rose in a roar, a long-drawn Yaaayyyyy . . . ! Brett thought of a stadium crowd as the home team trotted onto the field. He could hear a band now, a shrilling of brass, the clatter and thump of percussion instruments. Now he could see the mouth of the alley ahead, a sunny street hung with bunting, the backs of people, and over their heads the rhythmic bobbing of a passing procession, tall shakos and guidons in almost-even rows. Two tall poles with a streamer between them swung

into view. He caught a glimpse of tall red letters:

. . . For Our Side!

HE moved closer, edged up behind the grey-backed crowd. A phalanx of yellow-tuniced men approached, walking stiffly, fez tassles swinging. A small boy darted out into the street, loped along at their side. The music screeched and wheezed. Brett tapped the man before him.

"What's it all about . . . ?"

He couldn't hear his own voice. The man ignored him. Brett moved along behind the crowd, looking for a vantage point or a thinning in the ranks. There seemed to be fewer people ahead. He came to the end of the crowd, moved on a few yards, stood at the curb. The yellow-jackets had passed now, and a group of round-thighed girls in satin blouses and black boots and white fur caps glided into view, silent, expressionless. As they reached a point fifty feet from Brett, they broke abruptly into a strutting prance, knees high, hips flirting, tossing shining batons high, catching them, twirling them, and up again . . .

Brett craned his neck, looking for TV cameras. The crowd lining the opposite side of the street stood in solid ranks, drably clad, eyes following the procession, mouths working. A fat man in a rumpled suit and a panama hat

squeezed to the front, stood picking his teeth. Somehow, he seemed out of place among the others. Behind the spectators, the store fronts looked normal, dowdy brick and mismatched glass and oxidizing aluminum, dusty windows and cluttered displays of cardboard, a faded sign that read TODAY ONLY—PRICES SLASHED. To Brett's left the sidewalk stretched, empty. To his right the crowd was packed close, the shout rising and falling. Now a rank of blue-suited policemen followed the majorettes, swinging along silently. Behind them, over them, a piece of paper blew along the street. Brett turned to the man on his right.

"Pardon me. Can you tell me the name of this town?"

The man ignored him. Brett tapped the man's shoulder. "Hey! What town is this?"

The man took off his hat, whirled it overhead, then threw it up. It sailed away over the crowd, lost. Brett wondered briefly how people who threw their hats ever recovered them. But then, nobody he knew would throw his hat. . .

"You mind telling me the name of this place?" Brett said, as he took the man's arm, pulled. The man rotated toward Brett, leaning heavily against him. Brett stepped back. The man fell, lay stiffly, his arms moving, his eyes and mouth open.

"Ahhhhh," he said. "Whum-whum-whum. Awww, jawww. . ."

Brett stooped quickly. "I'm sorry," he cried. He looked around. "Help! This man. . ."

Nobody was watching. The next man, a few feet away, stood close against his neighbor, hatless, his jaw moving.

"This man's sick," said Brett, tugging at the man's arm. "He fell."

The man's eyes moved reluctantly to Brett. "None of my business," he muttered.

"Won't anybody give me a hand?"

"Probably a drunk."

Behind Brett a voice called in a penetrating whisper: "Quick! You! Get into the alley. . .!"

He turned. A gaunt man of about thirty with sparse reddish hair, perspiration glistening on his upper lip, stood at the mouth of a narrow way like the one Brett had come through. He wore a grimy pale yellow shirt with a wide-flaring collar, limp and sweat-stained, dark green knee-breeches, soft leather boots, scuffed and dirty, with limp tops that drooped over his ankles. He gestured, drew back into the alley. "In here."

Brett went toward him. "This man. . ."

"Come on, you fool!" The man took Brett's arm, pulled him deeper into the dark passage. Brett resisted. "Wait a minute.

That fellow . . ." He tried to point.

"Don't you know yet?" The red-head spoke with a strange accent. "Golems . . . You got to get out of sight before the—"

THE man froze, flattened himself against the wall. Automatically Brett moved to a place beside him. The man's head was twisted toward the alley mouth. The tendons in his weathered neck stood out. He had a three-day stubble of beard. Brett could smell him, standing this close. He edged away. "What—"

"Don't make a sound! Don't move, you idiot!" His voice was a thin hiss.

Brett followed the other's eyes toward the sunny street. The fallen man lay on the pavement, moving feebly, eyes open. Something moved up to him, a translucent brownish shape, like muddy water. It hovered for a moment, then dropped on the man like a breaking wave, flowed around him. The body shifted, rotating stiffly, then tilted upright. The sun struck through the fluid shape that flowed down now, amber highlights twinkling, to form itself into the crested wave, flow away.

"What the hell . . . !"

"Come on!" The red-head turned, trotted silently toward the shadowy bend under the high grey walls. He looked back, beck-

oned impatiently, passed out of sight around the turn—

Brett came up behind him, saw a wide avenue, tall trees with chartreuse springtime leaves, a wrought-iron fence, and beyond it, rolling green lawns. There were no people in sight.

"Wait a minute! What is this place?!"

His companion turned red-rimmed eyes on Brett. "How long have you been here?" he asked. "How did you get in?"

"I came through a gate. Just about an hour ago."

"I knew you were a man as soon as I saw you talking to the golem," said the red-head. "I've been here two months; maybe more. We've got to get out of sight. You want food? There's a place . . ." He jerked his thumb. "Come on. Time to talk later."

BRETT followed him. They turned down a side street, pushed through the door of a dingy cafe. It banged behind them. There were tables, stools at a bar, a dusty juke box. They took seats at a table. The red-head groped under the table, pulled off a shoe, hammered it against the wall. He cocked his head, listening. The silence was absolute. He hammered again. There was a clash of crockery from beyond the kitchen door. "Now don't say anything," the red-head said. He eyed the door

behind the counter expectantly. It flew open. A girl with red cheeks and untidy hair, dressed in a green waitress' uniform appeared, swept up to the table, pad and pencil in hand.

"Coffee and a ham sandwich," said the red-head. Brett said nothing. The girl glanced at him briefly, jotted hastily, whisked away.

"I saw them here the first day," the red-head said. "It was a piece of luck. I saw how the Gels started it up. They were big ones—not like the tidiers-up. As soon as they were finished, I came in and tried the same thing. It worked. I used the golem's lines—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Brett said. "I'm going to ask that girl—"

"Don't say anything to her; it might spoil everything. The whole sequence might collapse; or it might call the Gels. I'm not sure. You can have the food when it comes back with it."

"Why do you say 'when 'it' comes back'?"

"Ah." He looked at Brett strangely. "I'll show you."

Brett could smell food now. His mouth watered. He hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours.

"Care, that's the thing," the red-head said. "Move quiet, and stay out of sight, and you can live like a County Duke. Food's the hardest, but here—"

The red-cheeked girl reappeared, a tray balanced on one arm, a heavy cup and saucer in the other hand. She clattered them down on the table.

"Took you long enough," the red-head said. The girl sniffed, opened her mouth to speak—and the red-head darted out a stiff finger, jabbed her under the ribs. She stood, mouth open, frozen.

Brett half rose. "He's crazy, miss," he said. "Please accept—"

"Don't waste your breath." Brett's host was looking at him triumphantly. "Why do I call it 'it'?" He stood up, reached out and undid the top buttons of the green uniform. The waitress stood, leaning slightly forward, unmoving. The blouse fell open, exposing round white breasts—unadorned, blind.

"A doll," said the red-head. "A puppet; a golem."

BRETT stared at her, the damp curls at her temple, the tip of her tongue behind her teeth, the tiny red veins in her round cheeks, and the white skin curving . . .

"That's a quick way to tell 'em," said the red-head. "The teat is smooth." He rebuttoned the uniform, then jabbed again at the girl's ribs. She straightened, patted her hair.

"No doubt a gentleman like you is used to better," she said carelessly. She went away.

"I'm Awalawon Dhuva," the red-head said.

"My name's Brett Hale." Brett took a bite of the sandwich.

"Those clothes," Dhuva said. "And you have a strange way of talking. What county are you from?"

"Jefferson."

"Never heard of it. I'm from Wavly. What brought you here?"

"I was on a train. The tracks came to an end out in the middle of nowhere. I walked . . . and here I am. What is this place?"

"Don't know." Dhuva shook his head. "I knew they were lying about the Fire River, though. Never did believe all that stuff. Religious hokum, to keep the masses quiet. Don't know what to believe now. Take the roof. They say a hundred kharfads up; but how do we know? Maybe it's a thousand—or only ten. By Grat, I'd like to go up in a balloon, see for myself."

"What are you talking about?" Brett said. "Go where in a balloon? See what?"

"Oh, I've seen one at the Tourney. Big hot-air bag, with a basket under it. Tied down with a rope. But if you cut the rope . . . ! But you can bet the priests will never let that happen, no, sir." Dhuva looked at Brett speculatively. "What about your county: Fession, or whatever you called it. How high do they tell you it is there?"

"You mean the sky? Well, the air ends after a few miles and space just goes on—millions of miles—"

Dhuva slapped the table and laughed. "The people in Fession must be some yokels! Just goes on up; now who'd swallow that tale? He chuckled.

"Only a child thinks the sky is some kind of tent," said Brett. "Haven't you ever heard of the Solar System, the other planets?"

"What are those?"

"Other worlds. They all circle around the sun, like the Earth."

"Other worlds, eh? Sailing around up under the roof? Funny; I never saw them." Dhuva snickered. "Wake up, Brett. Forget all those stories. Just believe what you see."

"What about that brown thing?"

"The Gels? They run this place. Look out for them, Brett. Stay alert. Don't let them see you."

WHAT do they do?"

"I don't know—and I don't want to find out. This is a great place—I like it here. I have all I want to eat, plenty of nice rooms for sleeping. There's the parades and the scenes. It's a good life—as long as you keep out of sight."

"How do you get out of here?" Brett asked, finishing his coffee.

"Don't know how to get out; over the wall, I suppose. I don't plan to leave though. I left home in a hurry. The Duke—never mind. I'm not going back."

"Are all the people here . . . golems?" Brett said. "Aren't there any more real people?"

"You're the first I've seen. I spotted you as soon as I saw you. A live man moves different than a golem. You see golems doing things like knitting their brows, starting back in alarm, looking askance, and standing arms akimbo. And they have things like pursed lips and knowing glances and mirthless laughter. You know: all the things you read about, that real people never do. But now that you're here, I've got somebody to talk to. I did get lonesome, I admit. I'll show you where I stay and we'll fix you up with a bed."

"I won't be around that long."

"What can you get outside that you can't get here? There's everything you need here in the city. We can have a great time."

"You sound like my Aunt Haicey," Brett said. "She said I had everything I needed back in Casperton. How does she know what I need? How do you know? How do I know myself? I can tell you I need more than food and a place to sleep—"

"What more?"

"Everything. Things to think about and something worth do-

ing. Why, even in the movies—"

"What's a movie?"

"You know, a play, on film. A moving picture."

"A picture that moves?"

"That's right."

"This is something the priests told you about?" Dhuva seemed to be holding in his mirth.

"Everybody's seen movies."

Dhuva burst out laughing. "Those priests," he said. "They're the same everywhere, I see. The stories they tell, and people believe them. What else?"

"Priests have nothing to do with it."

Dhuva composed his features. "What do they tell you about Grat, and the Wheel?"

"Grat? What's that?"

"The Over-Being. The Four-eyed One." Dhuva made a sign, caught himself. "Just habit," he said. "I don't believe that rubbish. Never did."

"I suppose you're talking about God," Brett said.

"I don't know about God. Tell me about it."

"He's the creator of the world. He's . . . well, superhuman. He knows everything that happens, and when you die, if you've led a good life, you meet God in Heaven."

"Where's that?"

"It's . . ." Brett waved a hand vaguely, "up above."

"But you said there was just emptiness up above," Dhuva re-

called. "And some other worlds whirling around, like islands adrift in the sea."

"Well—"

"Never mind," Dhuva held up his hands. "Our priests are liars too. All that balderdash about the Wheel and the River of Fire. It's just as bad as your Hivvel or whatever you called it. And our Grat and your Mud, or Gog: they're the same—" Dhuva's head went up. "What's that?"

"I didn't hear anything."

DHUVA got to his feet, turned to the door. Brett rose. A towering brown shape, glassy and transparent, hung in the door, its surface rippling. Dhuva whirled, leaped past Brett, dived for the rear door. Brett stood frozen. The shape flowed—swift as quicksilver—caught Dhuva in mid-stride, engulfed him. For an instant Brett saw the thin figure, legs kicking, upended within the muddy form of the Gel. Then the turbid wave swept across to the door, sloshed it aside, disappeared. Dhuva was gone.

Brett stood rooted, staring at the doorway. A bar of sunlight fell across the dusty floor. A brown mouse ran along the baseboard. It was very quiet. Brett went to the door through which the Gel had disappeared, hesitated a moment, then thrust it open.

He was looking down into a

great dark pit, acres in extent, its sides riddled with holes, the amputated ends of water and sewage lines and power cables dangling. Far below light glistened from the surface of a black pool. A few feet away the waitress stood unmoving in the dark on a narrow strip of linoleum. At her feet the chasm yawned. The edge of the floor was ragged, as though it had been gnawed away by rats. There was no sign of Dhuva.

Brett stepped back into the dining room, let the door swing shut. He took a deep breath, picked up a paper napkin from a table and wiped his forehead, dropped the napkin on the floor and went out into the street, his suitcase forgotten now. At the corner he turned, walked along past silent shop windows crowded with home permanents, sun glasses, fingernail polish, suntan lotion, paper cartons, streamers, plastic toys, vari-colored garments of synthetic fiber, home remedies, beauty aids, popular music, greeting cards . . .

At the next corner he stopped, looking down the silent streets. Nothing moved. Brett went to a window in a grey concrete wall, pulled himself up to peer through the dusty pane, saw a room filled with tailor's forms, garment racks, a bicycle, bundled back issues of magazines without covers.

He went along to a door. It was solid, painted shut. The next door looked easier. He wrenched at the tarnished brass nob, then stepped back and kicked the door. With a hollow sound the door fell inward, taking with it the jamb. Brett stood staring at the gaping opening. A fragment of masonry dropped with a dry clink. Brett stepped through the breach in the grey facade. The black pool at the bottom of the pit winked a flicker of light back at him in the deep gloom.

AROUND him, the high walls of the block of buildings loomed in silhouette; the squares of the windows were ranks of luminous blue against the dark. Dust motes danced in shafts of sunlight. Far above, the roof was dimly visible, a spidery tangle of trusswork. And below was the abyss.

At Brett's feet the stump of a heavy brass rail projected an inch from the floor. It was long enough, Brett thought, to give firm anchor to a rope. Somewhere below, Dhuvu—a stranger who had befriended him—lay in the grip of the Gels. He would do what he could—but he needed equipment—and help. First he would find a store with rope, guns, knives. He would—

The broken edge of masonry where the door had been caught his eye. The shell of the wall, ex-

posed where the door frame had torn away, was wafer-thin. Brett reached up, broke off a piece. The outer face—the side that showed on the street—was smooth, solid-looking. The back was porous, nibbled. Brett stepped outside, examined the wall. He kicked at the grey surface. A great piece of wall, six feet high, broke into fragments, fell on the sidewalk with a crash, driving out a puff of dust. Another section fell. One piece of it skidded away, clattered down into the depths. Brett heard a distant splash. He looked at the great jagged opening in the wall—like a jigsaw picture with a piece missing. He turned and started off at a trot, his mouth dry, his pulse thumping painfully in his chest.

Two blocks from the hollow building, Brett slowed to a walk, his footsteps echoing in the empty street. He looked into each store window as he passed. There were artificial legs, bottles of colored water, immense dolls, wigs, glass eyes—but no rope. Brett tried to think. What kind of store would handle rope? A marine supply company, maybe. But where would he find one?

Perhaps it would be easiest to look in a telephone book. Ahead he saw a sign lettered **H O T E L**. Brett went up to the revolving door, pushed inside. He was in a dim, marble-panelled lobby, with

double doors leading into a beige-carpeted bar on his right, the brass-painted cage of an elevator directly before him, flanked by tall urns of sand and an ascending staircase. On the left was a dark mahogany-finished reception desk. Behind the desk a man stood silently, waiting. Brett felt a wild surge of relief.

"Those things, those Gels!" he called, starting across the room. "My friend—"

He broke off. The clerk stood, staring over Brett's shoulder, holding a pen poised over a book. Brett reached out, took the pen. The man's finger curled stiffly around nothing. A golem.

BRETT turned away, went into the bar. Vacant stools were ranged before a dark mirror. At the tables empty glasses stood before empty chairs. Brett started as he heard the revolving door thump-thump. Suddenly soft light bathed the lobby behind him. Somewhere a piano tinkled *More Than You Know*. With a distant clatter of closing doors the elevator came to life.

Brett hugged a shadowed corner, saw a fat man in a limp seersucker suit cross to the reception desk. He had a red face, a bald scalp blotched with large brown freckles. The clerk inclined his head blandly.

"Ah, yes, sir, a nice double with bath . . ." Brett heard the

unctuous voice of the clerk as he offered the pen. The fat man took it, scrawled something in the register. ". . . at fourteen dollars," the clerk murmured. He smiled, dinged the bell. A boy in tight green tunic and trousers and a pillbox cap with a chin strap pushed through a door beside the desk, took the key, led the way to the elevator. The fat man entered. Through the openwork of the shaft Brett watched as the elevator car rose, greasy cables trembling and swaying. He started back across the lobby—and stopped dead.

A wet brown shape had appeared in the entrance. It flowed across the rug to the bellhop. Face blank, the golem turned back to its door. Above, Brett heard the elevator stop. Doors clashed. The clerk stood poised behind the desk. The Gel hovered, then flowed away. The piano was silent now. The lights burned, a soft glow, then winked out. Brett thought about the fat man. He had seen him before . . .

He went up the stairs. In the second floor corridor Brett felt his way along in near-darkness, guided by the dim light coming through transoms. He tried a door. It opened. He stepped into a large bedroom with a double bed, an easy chair, a chest of drawers. He crossed the room, looked out across an alley. Twenty feet away white curtains hung

at windows in a brick wall. There was nothing behind the windows.

There were sounds in the corridor. Brett dropped to the floor behind the bed.

"All right, you two," a drunken voice bellowed. "And may all your troubles be little ones." There was laughter, squeals, a dry clash of beads flung against the door. A key grated. The door swung wide. Lights blazed in the hall, silhouetting the figures of a man in black jacket and trousers, a woman in a white bridal dress and veil, flowers in her hand.

"Take care, Mel!"

". . . do anything I wouldn't do!"

". . . kiss the bride, now!"

The couple backed into the room, pushed the door shut, stood against it. Brett crouched behind the bed, not breathing, waiting. The couple stood at the door, in the dark, heads down . . .

BRETT stood, rounded the foot of the bed, approached the two unmoving figures. The girl looked young, sleek, perfect-featured, with soft dark hair. Her eyes were half-open; Brett caught a glint of light reflected from the eyeball. The man was bronzed, broad-shouldered, his hair wavy and blond. His lips were parted, showing even white teeth. The two stood, not breath-

ing, sightless eyes fixed on nothing.

Brett took the bouquet from the woman's hand. The flowers seemed real—except that they had no perfume. He dropped them on the floor, pulled at the male golem to clear the door. The figure pivoted, toppled, hit with a heavy thump. Brett raised the woman in his arms and propped her against the bed. Back at the door he listened. All was quiet now. He started to open the door, then hesitated. He went back to the bed, undid the tiny pearl buttons down the front of the bridal gown, pulled it open. The breasts were rounded, smooth, an unbroken creamy white . . .

In the hall, he started toward the stair. A tall Gel rippled into view ahead, its shape flowing and wavering, now billowing out, then rising up. The shifting form undulated toward Brett. He made a move to run, then remembered Dhruva, stood motionless. The Gel wobbled past him, slumped suddenly, flowed under a door. Brett let out a breath. Never mind the fat man. There were too many Gels here. He started back along the corridor.

Soft music came from double doors which stood open on a landing. Brett went to them, risked a look inside. Graceful couples moved sedately on a polished floor, diners sat at tables,

black-clad waiters moving among them. At the far side of the room, near a dusty rubber plant, sat the fat man, studying a menu. As Brett watched he shook out a napkin, ran it around inside his collar, then mopped his face.

Never disturb a scene, Dhuva had said. But perhaps he could blend with it. Brett brushed at his suit, straightened his tie, stepped into the room. A waiter approached, eyed him dubiously. Brett got out his wallet, took out a five-dollar bill.

"A quiet table in the corner," he said. He glanced back. There were no Gels in sight. He followed the waiter to a table near the fat man.

SEATED, he looked around. He wanted to talk to the fat man, but he couldn't afford to attract attention. He would watch, and wait his chance.

At the nearby tables men with well-pressed suits, clean collars, and carefully shaved faces murmured to sleekly gowned women who fingered wine glasses, smiled archly. He caught fragments of conversation:

"My dear, have you heard . . ."

" . . . in the low eighties . . ."

" . . . quite impossible. One must . . ."

" . . . for this time of year."

The waiter returned with a shallow bowl of milky soup.

Brett looked at the array of spoons, forks, knives, glanced sideways at the diners at the next table. It was important to follow the correct ritual. He put his napkin in his lap, careful to shake out all the folds. He looked at the spoons again, picked a large one, glanced at the waiter. So far so good . . .

"Wine, sir?"

Brett indicated the neighboring couple. "The same as they're having." The waiter turned away, returned holding a wine bottle, label toward Brett. He looked at it, nodded. The waiter busied himself with the cork, removing it with many flourishes, setting a glass before Brett, pouring half an inch of wine. He waited expectantly.

Brett picked up the glass, tasted it. It tasted like wine. He nodded. The waiter poured. Brett wondered what would have happened if he had made a face and spurned it. But it would be too risky to try. No one ever did it.

Couples danced, resumed their seats; others rose and took the floor. A string ensemble in a distant corner played restrained tunes that seemed to speak of the gentle faded melancholy of decorous tea dances on long-forgotten afternoons. Brett glanced toward the fat man. He was eating soup noisily, his napkin tied under his chin.

The waiter was back with a

plate. "Lovely day, sir," he said.

"Great," Brett agreed.

The waiter placed a covered platter on the table, removed the cover, stood with carving knife and fork poised.

"A bit of the crispy, sir?"

Brett nodded. He eyed the waiter surreptitiously. He looked real. Some golems seemed realer than others; or perhaps it merely depended on the parts they were playing. The man who had fallen at the parade had been only a sort of extra, a crowd member. The waiter, on the other hand, was able to converse. Perhaps it would be possible to learn something from him . . .

"What's . . . uh. . . how do you spell the name of this town?" Brett asked.

"I was never much of a one for spelling, sir," the waiter said.

"Try it."

"Gravy, sir?"

"Sure. Try to spell the name."

"Perhaps I'd better call the headwaiter, sir," the golem said stiffly.

From the corner of an eye Brett caught a flicker of motion. He whirled, saw nothing. Had it been a Gel?

"Never mind," he said. The waiter served potatoes, peas, re-filled the wine glass, moved off silently. The question had been a little too unorthodox, Brett decided. Perhaps if he led up to the subject more obliquely . . .

WHEN the waiter returned Brett said, "Nice day."

"Very nice, sir."

"Better than yesterday."

"Yes indeed, sir."

"I wonder what tomorrow'll be like."

"Perhaps we'll have a bit of rain, sir."

Brett nodded toward the dance floor. "Nice orchestra."

"They're very popular, sir."

"From here in town?"

"I wouldn't know as to that, sir."

"Lived here long yourself?"

"Oh, yes, sir." The waiter's expression showed disapproval. "Would there be anything else, sir?"

"I'm a newcomer here," Brett said. "I wonder if you could tell me—"

"Excuse me, sir." The waiter was gone. Brett poked at the mashed potatoes. Quizzing golems was hopeless. He would have to find out for himself. He turned to look at the fat man. As Brett watched he took a large handkerchief from a pocket, blew his nose loudly. No one turned to look. The orchestra played softly. The couples danced. Now was as good a time as any . . .

Brett rose, crossed to the other's table. The man looked up.

"Mind if I sit down?" Brett said. "I'd like to talk to you."

The fat man blinked, motioned

to a chair. Brett sat down, leaned across the table. "Maybe I'm wrong," he said quietly, "but I think you're real."

The fat man blinked again. "What's that?" he snapped. He had a high petulant voice.

"You're not like the rest of them. I think I can talk to you. I think you're another outsider."

The fat man looked down at his rumpled suit. "I . . . ah . . . was caught a little short today. Didn't have time to change. I'm a busy man. And what business is it of yours?" He clamped his jaw shut, eyed Brett warily.

"I'm a stranger here," Brett said. "I want to find out what's going on in this place—"

"Buy an amusement guide. Lists all the shows—"

"I don't mean that. I mean these dummies all over the place, and the Gels—"

"What dummies? Jells? Jello? You don't like Jello?"

"I love Jello. I don't—"

"Just ask the waiter. He'll bring you your Jello. Any flavor you like. Now if you'll excuse me . . ."

"I'm talking about the brown things; they look like muddy water. They come around if you interfere with a scene."

The fat man looked nervous. "Please. Go away."

"If I make a disturbance, the Gels will come. Is that what you're afraid of?"

"Now, now. Be calm. No need for you to get excited."

"I won't make a scene," Brett said. "Just talk to me. How long have you been here?"

"I dislike scenes. I dislike them intensely."

"When did you come here?"

"Just ten minutes ago. I just sat down. I haven't had my dinner yet. Please, young man. Go back to your table." The fat man watched Brett warily. Sweat glistened on his bald head.

"I mean this town. How long have you been here? Where did you come from?"

"Why, I was born here. Where did I come from? What sort of question is that? Just consider that the stork brought me."

"You were born here?"

"Certainly."

"What's the name of the town?"

ARE you trying to make a fool of me?" The fat man was getting angry. His voice was rising.

"Shhh," Brett cautioned. "You'll attract the Gels."

"Blast the Jilts, whatever that is!" the fat man snapped. "Now, get along with you. I'll call the manager."

"Don't you know?" Brett said, staring at the fat man. "They're all dummies; golems, they're called. They're not real."

"Who're not real?"

"All these imitation people at the tables and on the dance floor. Surely you realize—"

"I realize you're in need of medical attention." The fat man pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "You keep the table," he said. "I'll dine elsewhere."

"Wait!" Brett got up, seized the fat man's arm.

"Take your hands off me—" The fat man went toward the door. Brett followed. At the cashier's desk Brett turned suddenly, saw a fluid brown shape flicker—

"Look!" He pulled at the fat man's arm—

"Look at what?" The Gel was gone.

"It was there: a Gel."

The fat man flung down a bill, hurried away. Brett fumbled out a ten, waited for change. "Wait!" he called. He heard the fat man's feet receding down the stairs.

"Hurry," he said to the cashier. The woman sat glassy-eyed, staring at nothing. The music died. The lights flickered, went off. In the gloom Brett saw a fluid shape rise up—

He ran, pounding down the stairs. The fat man was just rounding the corner. Brett opened his mouth to call—and went rigid, as a translucent shape of mud shot from the door, rose up to tower before him. Brett stood, mouth half open, eyes staring, leaning forward with hands outflung. The Gel

loomed, its surface flickering—waiting. Brett caught an acrid odor of geraniums.

A minute passed. Brett's cheek itched. He fought a desire to blink, to swallow—to turn and run. The high sun beat down on the silent street, the still window displays.

Then the Gel broke form, slumped, flashed away. Brett tottered back against the wall, let his breath out in a harsh sigh.

Across the street he saw a window with a display of camping equipment, portable stoves, boots, rifles. He crossed the street, tried the door. It was locked. He looked up and down the street. There was no one in sight. He kicked in the glass beside the latch, reached through and turned the knob. Inside he looked over the shelves, selected a heavy coil of nylon rope, a sheath knife, a canteen. He examined a Winchester repeating rifle with a telescopic sight, then put it back and strapped on a .22 revolver. He emptied two boxes of long rifle cartridges into his pocket, then loaded the pistol. He coiled the rope over his shoulder and went back out into the empty street.

THE fat man was standing in front of a shop in the next block, picking at a blemish on his chin and eyeing the window display. He looked up with a

frown, started away as Brett came up.

"Wait a minute," Brett called. "Didn't you see the Gel? the one that cornered me back there?"

The fat man looked back suspiciously, kept going.

"Wait!" Brett caught his arm. "I know you're real. I've seen you belch and sweat and scratch. You're the only one I can call on—and I need help. My friend is trapped—"

The fat man pulled away, his face flushed an even deeper red. "I'm warning you, you maniac: get away from me . . .!"

Brett stepped close, rammed the fat man hard in the ribs. He sank to his knees, gasping. The panama hat rolled away. Brett grabbed his arm, steadied him.

"Sorry," he said. "I had to be sure. You're real, all right. We've got to rescue my friend, Dhuv—"

The fat man leaned against the glass, rolling terrified eyes, rubbing his stomach. "I'll call the police!" he gasped.

"What police?" Brett waved an arm. "Look. Not a car in sight. Did you ever see the street that empty before?"

"Wednesday afternoon," the fat man gasped.

"Come with me. I want to show you. It's all hollow. There's nothing behind these walls—"

"Why doesn't somebody come along?" the fat man moaned.

"The masonry is only a quarter-inch thick," Brett said. "Come on; I'll show you."

"I don't like it," said the fat man. His face was pale and moist. "You're mad. What's wrong? It's so quiet . . ."

"We've got to try to save him. The Gel took him down into this pit—"

"Let me go," the man whined. "I'm afraid. Can't you just let me lead my life in peace?"

"Don't you understand? The Gel took a man. They may be after you next."

"There's no one after me! I'm a business man . . . a respectable citizen. I mind my own business, give to charity, go to church. All I want is to be left alone!"

BRETT dropped his hands from the fat man's arms, stood looking at him: the blotched face, pale now, the damp forehead, the quivering jowls. The fat man stooped for his hat, slapped it against his leg, clamped it on his head.

"I think I understand now," said Brett. "This is your place, this imitation city. Everything's faked to fit your needs—like in the hotel. Wherever you go, the scene unrolls in front of you. You never see the Gels, never discover the secret of the golems—because you conform. You never do the unexpected."

"That's right. I'm law-abiding. I'm respectable. I don't pry. I don't nose into other people's business. Why should I? Just let me alone . . ."

"Sure," Brett said. "Even if I dragged you down there and showed you, you wouldn't believe it. But you're not in the scene now. I've taken you out of it—"

Suddenly the fat man turned and ran a few yards, then looked back to see whether Brett was pursuing him. He shook a round fist.

"I've seen your kind before," he shouted. "Troublemakers."

Brett took a step toward him. The fat man yelped and ran another fifty feet, his coat tails bobbing. He looked back, stopped, a fat figure alone in the empty sunny street.

"You haven't seen the last of me!" he shouted. "We know how to deal with your kind." He tugged at his vest, went off along the sidewalk. Brett watched him go, then started back toward the hollow building.

* * *

The jagged fragments of masonry Brett had knocked from the wall lay as he had left them. He stepped through the opening, peered down into the murky pit, trying to judge its depth. A hundred feet at least. Perhaps a hundred and fifty.

He unslung the rope from his shoulder, tied one end to the

brass stump, threw the coil down the precipitous side. It fell away into darkness, hung swaying. It was impossible to tell whether the end reached any solid footing below. He couldn't waste any more time looking for help. He would have to try it alone.

There was a scrape of shoe leather on the pavement outside. He turned, stepped out into the white sunlight. The fat man rounded the corner, recoiled as he saw Brett. He flung out a pudgy forefinger, his protruding eyes wide in his blotchy red face.

"There he is! I told you he came this way!" Two uniformed policemen came into view. One eyed the gun at Brett's side, put a hand on his own.

"Better take that off, sir."

"Look!" Brett said to the fat man. He stooped, picked up a crust of masonry. "Look at this—just a shell—"

"He's blasted a hole right in that building, officer!" the fat man shrilled. "He's dangerous."

The cop ignored the gaping hole in the wall. "You'll have to come along with me, sir. This gentleman registered a complaint . . ."

Brett stood staring into the cop's eyes. They were pale blue eyes, looking steadily back at him from a bland face. Could the cop be real? Or would he be able to push him over, as he had other golems?

"The fellow's not right in the head," the fat man was saying to the cop. "You should have heard his crazy talk. A trouble-maker. His kind have got to be locked up!"

The cop nodded. "Can't have anyone causing trouble."

"Only a young fellow," said the fat man. He mopped at his forehead with a large handkerchief. "Tragic. But I'm sure that you men know how to handle him."

"Better give me the gun, sir." The cop held out a hand. Brett moved suddenly, rammed stiff fingers into the cop's ribs. He stiffened, toppled, lay rigid, staring up at nothing.

"You . . . you killed him," the fat man gasped, backing. The second cop tugged at his gun. Brett leaped at him, sent him down with a blow to the ribs. He turned to face the fat man.

"I didn't kill them! I just turned them off. They're not real, they're just golems."

"A killer! And right in the city, in broad daylight."

"You've got to help me!" Brett cried. "This whole scene: don't you see? It has the air of something improvised in a hurry, to deal with the unexpected factor; that's me. The Gels know something's wrong, but they can't quite figure out what. When you called the cops the Gels obliged —"

STARTLINGLY the fat man burst into tears. He fell to his knees.

"Don't kill me . . . oh, don't kill me . . ."

"Nobody's going to kill you, you fool!" Brett snapped. "Look! I want to show you!" He seized the fat man's lapel, dragged him to his feet and across the sidewalk, through the opening. The fat man stopped dead, stumbled back—

"What's this? What kind of place is this?" He scrambled for the opening.

"It's what I've been trying to tell you. This city you live in—it's a hollow shell. There's nothing inside. None of it's real. Only you . . . and me. There was another man: Dhruva. I was in a cafe with him. A gel came. He tried to run. It caught him. Now he's . . . down there."

"I'm not alone," the fat man babbled. "I have my friends, my clubs, my business associates. I'm insured. Lately I've been thinking a lot about Jesus—"

He broke off, whirled, and jumped for the doorway. Brett leaped after him, caught his coat. It ripped. The fat man stumbled over one of the cop-golems, went to hands and knees. Brett stood over him.

"Get up, damn it!" he snapped. "I need help and you're going to help me!" He hauled the fat man to his feet. "All you have to do is

stand by the rope. Dhuva may be unconscious when I find him. You'll have to help me haul him up. If anybody comes along, any Gels, I mean—give me a signal. A whistle . . . like this—" Brett demonstrated. "And if I get in trouble, do what you can. Here . . ." Brett started to offer the fat man the gun, then handed him the hunting knife. "If anybody interferes, this may not do any good, but it's something. I'm going down now."

The fat man watched as Brett gripped the rope, let himself over the edge. Brett looked up at the glistening face, the damp strands of hair across the freckled scalp. Brett had no assurance that the man would stay at his post, but he had done what he could.

"Remember," said Brett. "It's a real man they've got, like you and me . . . not a Golem. We owe it to him." The fat man's hands trembled. He watched Brett, licked his lips. Brett started down.

* * *

The descent was easy. The rough face of the excavation gave footholds. The end of a decaying timber projected; below it was the stump of a crumbling concrete pipe two feet in diameter. Brett was ten feet below the rim of floor now. Above, the broad figure of the fat man was visible in silhouette against the jagged opening in the wall.

Now the cliff shelved back; the rope hung free. Brett eased past the cut end of a rusted water pipe, went down hand over hand. If there were nothing at the bottom to give him footing, it would be a long climb back . . .

Twenty feet below he could see the still black water, pockmarked with expanding rings where bits of debris dislodged by his passage peppered the surface.

There was a rhythmic vibration in the rope. Brett felt it through his hands, a fine sawing sensation . . .

He was falling, gripping the limp rope . . .

He slammed on his back in three feet of oily water. The coils of rope collapsed around him with a sustained splashing. He got to his feet, groped for the end of the rope. The glossy nylon strands had been cleanly cut.

FOR half an hour Brett waded in waist-deep water along a wall of damp clay that rose sheer above him. Far above, bars of dim sunlight crossed the upper reaches of the cavern. He had seen no sign of Dhuva . . . or the gels.

He encountered a sodden timber that projected above the surface of the pool, clung to it to rest. Bits of flotsam—a plastic pistol, bridge tallies, a golf bag—floated in the black water. A

tunnel extended through the clay wall ahead; beyond, Brett could see a second great cavern rising. He pictured the city, silent and empty above, and the honey-combed earth beneath. He moved on.

An hour later Brett had traversed the second cavern. Now he clung to an outthrust spur of granite directly beneath the point at which Dhuva had disappeared. Far above he could see the green-clad waitress standing stiffly on her ledge. He was tired. Walking in water, his feet floundering in soft mud, was exhausting. He was no closer to escape, or to finding Dhuva, than he had been when the fat man cut the rope. He had been a fool to leave the man alone, with a knife . . . but he had had no choice.

He would have to find another way out. Endlessly wading at the bottom of the pit was useless. He would have to climb. One spot was as good as another. He stepped back and scanned the wall of clay looming over him. Twenty feet up, water dripped from the broken end of a four-inch water main. Brett uncoiled the rope from his shoulder, tied a loop in the end, whirled it and cast upward. It missed, fell back with a splash. He gathered it in, tried again. On the third try it caught. He tested it, then started up. His hands were slippery with mud and water. He twined the

rope around his legs, inched higher. The slender cable was smooth as glass. He slipped back two feet, then inched upward, slipped again, painfully climbed, slipped, climbed.

After the first ten feet he found toe-holds in the muddy wall. He worked his way up, his hands aching and raw. A projecting tangle of power cable gave a secure purchase for a foot. He rested. Nearby, an opening two feet in diameter gaped in the clay: a tunnel. It might be possible to swing sideways across the face of the clay and reach the opening. It was worth a try. His stiff, clay-slimed hands would pull him no higher.

He gripped the rope, kicked off sideways, hooked a foot in the tunnel mouth, half jumped, half fell into the mouth of the tunnel. He clung to the rope, shook it loose from the pipe above, coiled it and looped it over his shoulder. On hands and knees he started into the narrow passage.

THE tunnel curved left, then right, dipped, then angled up. Brett crawled steadily, the smooth stiff clay yielding and cold against his hands and sodden knees. Another smaller tunnel joined from the left. Another angled in from above. The tunnel widened to three feet, then four. Brett got to his feet, walked in a crouch. Here and there, barely

visible in the near-darkness, objects lay imbedded in the mud: a silver-plated spoon, its handle bent; the rusted engine of an electric train a portable radio, green with corrosion from burst batteries.

At a distance, Brett estimated, of a hundred yards from the pit, the tunnel opened into a vast cave, greenlit from tiny discs of frosted glass set in the ceiling far above. A row of discolored concrete piles, the foundations of the building above, protruded against the near wall, their surfaces nibbled and pitted. Between Brett and the concrete columns the floor was littered with pale sticks and stones, gleaming dully in the gloom.

Brett started across the floor. One of the sticks snapped underfoot. He kicked a melon-sized stone. It rolled lightly, came to rest with hollow eyes staring toward him. A human skull.

* * *

The floor of the cave covered an area the size of a city block. It was blanketed with human bones, with here and there a small cat skeleton or the fanged snout-bones of a dog. There was a constant rustling of rats that played among the rib cages, sat atop crania, scuttled behind shin-bones. Brett picked his way, stepping over imitation pearl necklaces, zircon rings, plastic buttons, hearing aids, lipsticks,

compacts, corset stays, prosthetic devices, rubber heels, wrist watches, lapel watches, pocket watches with corroded brass chains.

Ahead Brett saw a patch of color: a blur of pale yellow. He hurried, stumbling over bone heaps, crunching eyeglasses underfoot. He reached the still figure where it lay slackly, face down. Gingerly he squatted, turned it on its back. It was Dhuva.

Brett slapped the cold wrists, rubbed the clammy hands. Dhuva stirred, moaned weakly. Brett pulled him to a sitting position. "Wake up!" he whispered. "Wake up!"

Dhuva's eyelids fluttered. He blinked dully at Brett.

"The Gels may turn up any minute," Brett hissed. "We have to get away from here. Can you walk?"

"I saw it," said Dhuva faintly. "But it moved so fast . . ."

"You're safe here for the moment," Brett said. "There are none of them around. But they may be back. We've got to find a way out!"

Dhuva started up, staring around. "Where am I?" he said hoarsely. Brett seized his arm, steadied him on his feet.

"We're in a hollowed-out cave," he said. "The whole city is undermined with them. They're connected by tunnels. We have to

find one leading back to the surface."

Dhuva gazed around at the acres of bones. "It left me here for dead."

"Cr to die," said Brett.

"Look at them," Dhuva breathed. "Hundreds . . . thousands . . ."

"The whole population, it looks like. The Gels must have whisked them down here one by one."

"But why?"

"For interfering with the scenes. But that doesn't matter now. What matters is getting out. Come on. I see tunnels on the other side."

They crossed the broad floor, around them the white bones, the rustle of rats. They reached the far side of the cave, picked a six-foot tunnel which trended upward, a trickle of water seeping out of the dark mouth. They started up the slope.

WE have to have a weapon against the Gels," said Brett.

"Why? I don't want to fight them." Dhuva's voice was thin, frightened. "I want to get away from here . . . even back to Wavly. I'd rather face the Duke."

"This was a real town, once," said Brett. "The Gels have taken it over, hollowed out the buildings, mined the earth under it, killed off the people, and put imitation people in their place. And

nobody ever knew. I met a man who's lived here all his life. He doesn't know. But we know . . . and we have to do something about it."

"It's not our business. I've had enough. I want to get away."

"The Gels must stay down below, somewhere in that maze of tunnels. For some reason they try to keep up appearances . . . but only for the people who belong here. They play out scenes for the fat man, wherever he goes. And he never goes anywhere he isn't expected to."

"We'll get over the wall somehow," said Dhuva. "We may starve, crossing the dry fields, but that's better than this."

They emerged from the tunnel into a coal bin, crossed to a sagging door, found themselves in a boiler room. Stairs led up to sunlight. In the street, in the shadow of tall buildings, a boxy sedan was parked at the curb. Brett went to it, tried the door. It opened. Keys dangled from the ignition switch. He slid into the dusty seat. Behind him there was a hoarse scream. Brett looked up. Through the streaked windshield he saw a mighty Gel rear up before Dhuva, who crouched back against the blackened brick front of the building.

"Don't move, Dhuva!" Brett shouted. Dhuva stood frozen, flattened against the wall. The Gel towered, its surface rippling.

Brett eased from the seat. He stood on the pavement, fifteen feet from the Gel. The rank Gel odor came in waves from the creature. Beyond it he could see Dhuva's white terrified face.

Silently Brett turned the latch of the old-fashioned auto hood, raised it. The copper fuel line curved down from the firewall to a glass sediment cup. The knurled retaining screw turned easily; the cup dropped into Brett's hand. Gasoline ran down in an amber stream. Brett pulled off his damp coat, wadded it, jammed it under the flow. Over his shoulder he saw Dhuva, still rigid—and the Gel, hovering, uncertain.

The coat was saturated with gasoline now. Brett fumbled a match box from his pocket. Wet. He threw the sodden container aside. The battery caught his eye, clamped in a rusted frame under the hood. He jerked the pistol from its holster, used it to



short the terminals. Tiny blue sparks jumped. He jammed the coat near, rasped the gun against the soft lead poles. With a whoosh! the coat caught; yellow flames leaped, soot-rimmed. Brett snatched at a sleeve, whirled the coat high. The great Gel, attracted by the sudden motion, rushed at him. He flung the blazing garment over the monster, leaped aside.

The creature went mad. It slumped, lashed itself against the pavement. The burning coat was thrown clear. The Gel threw itself across the pavement, into the gutter, sending a splatter of filthy water over Brett. From the corner of his eye, Brett saw Dhuva seize the burning coat, hurl it into the pooled gasoline in the gutter. Fire leaped twenty feet high; in its center the great Gel bucked and writhed. The ancient car shuddered as the frantic monster struck it. Black smoke boiled up; an unbelievable stench came to Brett's nostrils. He backed, coughing. Flames roared around the front of the car. Paint blistered and burned. A tire burst. In a final frenzy, the Gel whipped clear, lay, a great blackened shape of melting rubber, twitching, then still.

THEY'VE tunneled under everything," Brett said. "They've cut through power lines and water lines, concrete, steel, earth;

they've left the shell, shored up with spidery-looking truss work. Somehow they've kept water and power flowing to wherever they needed it—"

"I don't care about your theories," Dhuva said; "I only want to get away."

"It's bound to work, Dhuva. I need your help."

"No."

"Then I'll have to try alone." He turned away.

"Wait," Dhuva called. He came up to Brett. "I owe you a life; you saved mine. I can't let you down now. But if this doesn't work . . . or if you can't find what you want—"

"Then we'll go."

Together they turned down a side street, walking rapidly. At the next corner Brett pointed.

"There's one!" They crossed to the service station at a run. Brett tried the door. Locked. He kicked at it, splintered the wood around the lock. He glanced around inside. "No good," he called. "Try the next building. I'll check the one behind."

He crossed the wide drive, battered in a door, looked in at a floor covered with wood shavings. It ended ten feet from the door. Brett went to the edge, looked down. Diagonally, forty feet away, the underground fifty-thousand-gallon storage tank which supplied the gasoline pumps of the station perched,

isolated, on a column of striated clay, ribbed with chitinous Gel buttresses. The truncated feed lines ended six feet from the tank. From Brett's position, it was impossible to say whether the ends were plugged.

Across the dark cavern a square of light appeared. Dhuva stood in a doorway looking toward Brett.

"Over here, Dhuva!" Brett uncoiled his rope, arranged a slip-noose. He measured the distance with his eye, tossed the loop. It slapped the top of the tank, caught on a massive fitting. He smashed the glass from a window, tied the end of the rope to the center post. Dhuva arrived, watched as Brett went to the edge, hooked his legs over the rope, and started across to the tank.

It was an easy crossing. Brett's feet clanged against the tank. He straddled the six-foot cylinder, worked his way to the end, then clambered down to the two two-inch feed lines. He tested their resilience, then lay flat, eased out on them. There were plugs of hard waxy material in the cut ends of the pipes. Brett poked at them with the pistol. Chunks loosened and fell. He worked for fifteen minutes before the first trickle came. Two minutes later, two thick streams of gasoline were pouring down into the darkness.

BRETT and Dhuva piled sticks, scraps of paper, shavings, and lumps of coal around a core of gasoline-soaked rags. Directly above the heaped tinder a taut rope stretched from the window post to a child's wagon, the steel bed of which contained a second heap of combustibles. The wagon hung half over the ragged edge of the floor.

"It should take about fifteen minutes for the fire to burn through the rope," Brett said. "Then the wagon will fall and dump the hot coals in the gasoline. By then it will have spread all over the surface and flowed down side tunnels into other parts of the cavern system."

"But it may not get them all."

"It will get some of them. It's the best we can do right now. You get the fire going in the wagon; I'll start this one up."

Dhuva sniffed the air. "That fluid," he said. "We know it in Wavly as phlogistoneum. The wealthy use it for cooking."

"We'll use it to cook Gels." Brett struck a match. The fire leaped up, smoking. Dhuva watched, struck his match awkwardly, started his blaze. They stood for a moment watching. The nylon curled and blackened, melting in the heat.

"We'd better get moving," Brett said. "It doesn't look as though it will last fifteen minutes."

They stepped out into the street. Behind them wisps of smoke curled from the door. Dhuva seized Brett's arm. "Look!"

Half a block away the fat man in the panama hat strode toward them at the head of a group of men in grey flannel. "That's him!" the fat man shouted, "the one I told you about. I knew the scoundrel would be back!" He slowed, eyeing Brett and Dhuva warily.

"You'd better get away from here, fast!" Brett called. "There'll be an explosion in a few minutes—"

"Smoke!" the fat man yelled. "Fire! They've set fire to the city! There it is! pouring out of the window . . . and the door!" He started forward. Brett yanked the pistol from the holster, thumbed back the hammer.

"Stop right there!" he barked. "For your own good I'm telling you to run. I don't care about that crowd of golems you've collected, but I'd hate to see a real human get hurt—even a cowardly one like you."

"These are honest citizens," the fat man gasped, standing, staring at the gun. "You won't get away with this. We all know you. You'll be dealt with . . ."

"We're going now. And you're going too."

"You can't kill us all," the fat man said. He licked his lips. "We won't let you destroy our city."

AS the fat man turned to exhort his followers Brett fired, once twice, three times. Three golems fell on their faces. The fat man whirled.

"Devil!" he shrieked. "A killer is abroad!" He charged, mouth open. Brett ducked aside, tripped the fat man. He fell heavily, slamming his face against the pavement. The golems surged forward. Brett and Dhuva slammed punches to the sternum, took clumsy blows on the shoulder, back, chest. Golems fell. Brett ducked a wild swing, toppled his attacker, turned to see Dhuva deal with the last of the dummies. The fat man sat in the street, dabbing at his bleeding nose, the panama still in place.

"Get up," Brett commanded. "There's no time left."

"You've killed them. Killed them all . . ." The fat man got to his feet, then turned suddenly and plunged for the door from which a cloud of smoke poured. Brett hauled him back. He and Dhuva started off, dragging the struggling man between them. They had gone a block when their prisoner, with a sudden frantic jerk, freed himself, set off at a run for the fire.

"Let him go!" Dhuva cried. "It's too late to go back!"

The fat man leaped fallen golems, wrestled with the door, disappeared into the smoke.

Brett and Dhuva sprinted for the corner. As they rounded it a tremendous blast shook the street. The pavement before them quivered, opened in a wide crack. A ten-foot section dropped from view. They skirted the gaping hole, dashed for safety as the facades along the street cracked, fell in clouds of dust. The street trembled under a second explosion. Cracks opened, dust rising in puffs from the long wavering lines. Masonry collapsed around them. They put their heads down and ran.

* * *

Winded, Brett and Dhuva walked through the empty streets of the city. Behind them, smoke blackened the sky. Embers floated down around them. The odor of burning Gel was carried on the wind. The late sun shone on the blank pavement. A lone golem in a tassled fez, left over from the morning's parade, leaned stiffly against a lamp post, eyes blank. Empty cars sat in driveways. TV antennae stood forlornly against the sunset.

"That place looks lived-in," said Brett, indicating an open apartment window with a curtain billowing above a potter geranium. "I'll take a look."

He came back shaking his head. "They were all in the TV room. They looked so natural at first; I mean, they didn't look up or anything when I walked

in. I turned the set off. The electricity is still working anyway. Wonder how long it will last?"

They turned down a residential street. Underfoot the pavement trembled at a distant blast. They skirted a crack, kept going. Occasional golems stood in awkward poses or lay across sidewalks. One, clad in black, tilted awkwardly in a gothic entry of fretted stone work. "I guess there won't be any church this Sunday," said Brett.

He halted before a brown brick apartment house. An untended hose welled on a patch of sickly lawn. Brett went to the door, stood listening, then went in. Across the room the still figure of a woman sat in a rocker. A curl stirred on her smooth forehead. A flicker of expression seemed to cross the lined face. Brett started forward. "Don't be afraid. You can come with us—"

He stopped. A flapping window-shade cast restless shadows on the still golem features on which dust was already settling. Brett turned away, shaking his head.

"All of them," he said. "It's as though they were snipped out of paper. When the Gels died their dummies died with them."

"Why?" said Dhuva. "What does it all mean?"

"Mean?" said Brett. He shook his head, started off again along the street. "It doesn't mean any-

thing. It's just the way things are."

BRETT sat in a deserted Cadillac, tuning the radio.

"... anybody hear me?" said a plaintive voice from the speaker. "This is Ab Gullorian, at the Twin Spires. Looks like I'm the only one left alive. Can anybody hear me?"

Brett tuned. "... been asking the wrong questions ... looking for the Final Fact. Now these are strange matters, brothers. But if a flower blooms, what man shall ask why? What lore do we seek in a symphony. . . ?"

He twisted the knob again. "... Kansas City. Not more than half a dozen of us. And the dead! Piled all over the place. But it's a funny thing: Doc Potter started to do an autopsy—"

Brett turned the knob. "... CQ, CQ, CQ. This is Hollip Quate, calling CQ, CQ. There's been a disaster here at Port Wanderlust. We need—"

"Take Jesus into your hearts," another station urged.

"... to base," the radio said faintly, with much crackling. "Lunar Observatory to base. Come in, Lunar Control. This is Commander McVee of the Lunar Detachment, sole survivor—"

"... hello, Hollip Quate? Hollip Quate? This is Kansas City calling. Say, where did you say you were calling from . . . ?"

"It looks as though both of us had a lot of mistaken ideas about the world outside," said Brett. "Most of these stations sound as though they might as well be coming from Mars."

"I don't understand where the voices come from," Dhuva said. "But all the places they name are strange to me ... except the Twin Spires."

"I've heard of Kansas City," Brett said, "but none of the other ones."

The ground trembled. A low rumble rolled. "Another one," Brett said. He switched off the radio, tried the starter. It groaned, turned over. The engine caught, sputtered, then ran smoothly.

"Get in, Dhuva. We might as well ride. Which way do we go to get out of this place?"

"The wall lies in that direction," said Dhuva. "But I don't know about a gate."

"We'll worry about that when we get to it," said Brett. "This whole place is going to collapse before long. We really started something. I suppose other underground storage tanks caught—and gas lines, too."

A building ahead cracked, fell in a heap of pulverized plaster. The car bucked as a blast sent a ripple down the street. A manhole cover popped up, clattered a few feet, dropped from sight. Brett swerved, gunned the car.

It leaped over rubble, roared along the littered pavement. Brett looked in the rearview mirror. A block behind them the street ended. Smoke and dust rose from the immense pit.

"We just missed it that time!" he called. "How far to the wall?"

"Not far! Turn here . . ."

Brett rounded the corner with a shrieking of tires. Ahead the grey wall rose up, blank, featureless.

"This is a dead end!" Brett shouted.

"We'd better get out and run for it—"

"No time! I'm going to ram the wall! Maybe I can knock a hole in it."

DHUVU crouched; teeth gritted, Brett held the accelerator to the floor, roared straight toward the wall. The heavy car shot across the last few yards, struck—

And burst through a curtain of canvas into a field of dry stalks.

Brett steered the car in a wide curve to halt and look back. A blackened panama hat floated down, settled among the stalks. Smoke poured up in a dense cloud from behind the canvas wall. A fetid stench pervaded the air.

"That finishes that, I guess," Brett said.

"I don't know. Look there."

Brett turned. Far across the dry field columns of smoke rose from the ground.

"The whole thing's undermined," Brett said. "How far does it go?"

"No telling. But we'd better be off. Perhaps we can get beyond the edge of it. Not that it matters. We're all that's left . . ."

"You sound like the fat man," Brett said. "But why should we be so surprised to find out the truth? After all, we never saw it before. All we knew—or thought we knew—was what they told us. The moon, the other side of the world, a distant city . . . or even the next town. How do we really know what's there . . . unless we go and see for ourselves? Does a goldfish in his bowl know what the ocean is like?"

"Where did they come from, those Gels? How much of the world have they undermined? What about Wavly? Is it a golem country too? The Duke . . . and all the people I knew?"

"I don't know, Dhuvu. I've been wondering about the people in Casperston. Like Doc Welch. I used to see him in the street with his little black bag. I always thought it was full of pills and scalpels; but maybe it really had zebra's tails and toad's eyes in it. Maybe he's really a magician on his way to cast spells against demons. Maybe

the people I used to see hurrying to catch the bus every morning weren't really going to the office. Maybe they go down into caves and chip away at the foundations of things. Maybe they go up on rooftops and put on rainbow-colored robes and fly away. I used to pass by a bank in Casper-ton: a big grey stone building with little curtains over the bottom half of the windows. I never go in there. I don't have anything to do in a bank. I've always thought it was full of bankers, banking . . . Now I don't know. It could be anything . . ."

"That's why I'm afraid," Dh-u-va said. "It could be anything."

"Things aren't really any different than they were," said Brett, ". . . except that now we know." He turned the big car out across the field toward Casper-ton.

"I don't know what we'll find when we get back. Aunt Haicey, Pretty-Lee . . . But there's only one way to find out."

The moon rose as the car bumped westward, raising a trail of dust against the luminous sky of evening.

THE END

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MATTHEW T. BIRMINGHAM, Jr.

(Business Manager)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 19th day of September, 1962.

[SEAL] MICHAEL A. LALLI, Notary Public
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By all the laws of nature, he should have been dead. But if he were alive . . . then there was something he had to find.

CULLY

By JACK EGAN

Illustrated by SCHELLING

ABOVE him eighty feet of torpid, black water hung like a shroud of Death, and still he heard his ragged breathing. And something else. Cully concentrated on that sound, and the rhythmic pulsing of his heart. Somehow he had to retain a hold on his sanity . . . or his soul.

After an hour of careful breathing and exploring of body sensations, Cully realized he could move. He flexed an arm; a mote of gold sand sifted upward in the dark water. It had a pleasant color, in contrast with the ominous shades of the sea. In a few moments, he had struggled to a sitting position, delighting in the curtain of glittering metal grains whirling around him as he moved.

And the other sound. A humming in his mind; a distant burble of tiny voices of other minds. Words swirling in giddy patterns he couldn't understand.

Shortly thereafter, Cully discovered why he still lived, breathed: a suit. A yellow, plastic, water-tight suit, with an orange-on-black shield on the left breast pocket, and a clear bubble-helmet. He felt weight on his back and examined it: two air tanks and their regulator, a radio, and . . . the box.

Suit, tanks, regulator; radio, black water, box; sand, sea, stillness.

Cully considered his world. It

was small; it was conceivable; it was incomplete.

Where is it?

"Where is what?" He knew he had a voice—a means of communication between others of his kind, using low-frequency heat waves caused by agitation of air molecules. Why couldn't he make it work?

Words. Thousands of them, at his beck and call. What were they? What did they mean? He shifted uncomfortably in the tight yellow suit, searching the near horizon for . . .

Where is it?

A VAGUE calling came from beyond the black sea curtain. Objectively, because he could do nothing to stop them, he watched his feet pick up, move forward, put down; pick up, move forward, put down. Funny. He had the feeling, the concept, that this action held meaning. It was supposed to cause some reaction, accomplish an act. He wondered at the regular movement of his legs. One of them hurt. A hurt is a sensation of pain, caused by over-loading sensory-units in the body; a hurt is bad, because it indicates something is wrong.

Something certainly was wrong. Something stirred in Cully's mind. He stopped and sat down on the sandy sea bottom, gracefully, like a ballet dancer.

He examined his foot. There was a tiny hole in the yellow plastic fabric, and a thin string of red-black was oozing out. Blood. He knew.

He was bleeding. He could do nothing about it. He got up and resumed walking.

Where is it?

Cully lifted his head in annoyance at the sharp thought.

"Go away," he said in a low, pleading voice. The sound made him feel better. He began muttering to himself.

"Water, black, s-sand, hurt. Pain. Radio tanks . . ."

It didn't sound right. After a few minutes, he was quiet. The manythoughts were calling him. He must go to the manythoughts.

If his foot was bleeding, then something had happened; if something had happened, then his foot was bleeding.

"No!"

If something had happened, then maybe other things had happened—before that. But how could something happen in a world of flat gold sand and flaccid sea? Surely there was something wrong. Wrong: the state of being not-right; something had happened that was not-right. Cully stared at the edges of the unmoving curtain before him.

Where is it?

It was a driving, promise-filled concept. No words; just the sense that something wonderful

lay just beyond reach. But this voice was different from the manythoughts. It was directing his body; his mind was along for the ride.

The sameness of the sea and sand became unbearable. It was too-right, somehow. Cully felt anger, and kicked up eddies of dust. It changed the sameness a little. He kicked more up, until it swirled around him in a thick gold haze, blotting out the terrible emptiness of the sea.

He felt another weight at his side. He found a holster and gun. He recognized neither. Again he watched objectively as his hand pulled the black object out and handled it. His body was evidently familiar with it, though it was strange to his eyes. His finger slipped automatically into the trigger sheaf. His legs were still working under two drives: the manythoughts' urging, and something else, buried in him. A longing. Up-and-down, back-and-for-

Where is it?

Anger, frustration flared in him. His hand shot out, gun at ready. He turned around slowly. Through the settling trail of suspended sand, nothing was visible.

AGAIN he was moving. Something made his legs move. He walked on through the shrouds of Death until he felt a

taut singing in his nerves. An irrational fear sprang out in him, cascading down his spine, and Cully shuddered. Ahead there was something. Two motives: get there because it (they?) calls; get there because you must.

Where is it?

The mind-voice was excited, demanding. Something was out there, besides the sameness. Cully walked on, trailing gold. The deathcurtain parted . . .

An undulating garden of blue-and-gold streamers suddenly drifted toward him on an unfelt current. Cully was held, entranced. They flowed before him, their colors dazzling, hypnotic.

Come closer, Earthling, the manythoughts spoke inside his head, soothingly.

Here it is! Cully's mind shouted.

Cully's mind was held, hypnotized, but his body moved of its own volition.

He moved again. His mind and the manythoughts' spoke: fulfillment—almost. There was one action left that must be completed.

Cully's arms moved. They detached the small black box from his pack. He moved on into the midst of the weaving, gold-laced plants. Little spicules licked out from their flexing stalks and jabbed, unsensed, into Cully's body to draw nourishment. From

the manythoughts came the sense of complete fulfillment.

From Cully's mind came further orders.

Lie down. It was a collective concept. *Lie still. We are friends.*

He could not understand. They were speaking words; words were beyond him. His head shook in despair. The voices were implanting an emotion of horror at what his hands were doing, but he had no control over his body. It was as if it were not his.

The black box was now lying in the sand among the streaming plants. Cully's fingers reached out and caressed a small panel. A soundless 'click' ran through the murkiness. The strangely beautiful, gold-laced blue plants began a writhing dance. Their spicules withdrew and jabbed, withdrew and jabbed. A rending, silent scream tore the quiet waters.

NO! they cried. It was a negative command, mixed in with the terrible screaming. *Turn it off!*

"Stop it, stop it!" Cully tried to say, but there were no words. He tried to cover his ears within the helmet, but the cries went on. Emotions roiled the water: pain, hurt, reproach. Cully sobbed. Something was wrong here; something was killing the plants—the beautiful blue things! The plants were withering, dying. He looked up at them,

stupified, not understanding, tears streaming down his face. What did they want from him? What had he done . . .

Where is it?

A different direction materialized; a new concept of desire.

CULLY's body turned and crawled away from the wonderful, dying garden, oblivious to the pleadings floating, now weakly, in the torpid water. He scuffed up little motes of golden sand, leaving a low-lying scud along the bottom, back to the little black box in the garden. The plants, the box, all were forgotten by now. Cully crawled on, not knowing why. A rise appeared; surprise caught Cully unaware. A change in the sameness!

Where is it?

Again the voice was insistent. His desire was close ahead; he did not look back at the black churning on the sea bottom. His legs worked, his chest heaved, words swirled in his mind. He topped the rise

Below him, in the center of a shallow golden bowl, floated a long, shiny cylinder. Even from here he knew it was huge. He knew other things about it: how heavy it was; how it was; that it carried others of his kind. He had been in it before. And they were waiting for him. He lurched on.

"Captain! Here comes Cully!" the midshipman shouted from the airlock. "Look what they've done to him!"

The old man's grey eyes took in the spectacle without visible emotion. He watched the pathetic, bleeding yellow plastic sack crawl up to the ship and look up. His hands reached down and lifted Cully up into the lock.

They took his suit off and stared with loathing at what had once been a man. A white scar zig-zagged across his forehead. The Captain bent close, in range of the dim blue eyes.

"It was a brave thing you did, Cully. The whole system will be grateful. Venus could never be colonized as long as those cannibals were there to eat men, and drive men mad." Cully fingered the scar on his forehead, and looked unseeing into the old man's compassionate eyes. "I'm sorry Cully. We all are. But there was no other way. Prefrontal lobotomy, destruction of your speech center . . . it was the only way you could get past the telepaths and destroy them. I'm sorry, Cully. The race of Man shall long honor your name."

Cully smiled at the old man, the words churning in his brain; but he did not understand.

Where is it?

The emptiness was still there.

THE END



Illustrated by FINLAY

Progress Report: LIFE FORMS IN METEORITES

By BEN BOVA

The evidence is strong that certain meteorites contain life forms. Our e-t expert examines the evidence; and raises the question of whether such life is truly alien, or whether, indeed, it originated on earth and is merely returning to its cosmic home.

UNTIL last year, discussions of extra-terrestrial life were largely confined to science fictioneers and an occasional astronomer who was willing to grant that somewhere in the immensity of the universe there must be other living creatures, simply due to the blind laws of chance if for no other discernible reason.

True, in 1959 Dr. Melvin Calvin of the University of California announced the discovery

—in a meteorite that fell in Murray, Kentucky, in 1950—of a chemical that closely resembled cytosine, one of the basic constituents of DNA, the mainspring of all life on Earth. Calvin later won a Nobel Prize—but for his work in photosynthesis, not meteorites. Calvin's discovery, though, was only the first bubble in a pot that was quickly coming to a boil. Other scientists were examining meteorites, particu-



larly the same type as the Murray meteorites, called *carbonaceous chondrites*.

In March, 1961, a trio of scientists reported finding, on another meteorite, chemical substances that closely resembled the chemicals of living creatures. They concluded that the substances came from living forms that originated in the meteorite's parent body. The three men responsible for this work were Profs. Bartholomew Nagy and Douglas J. Hennessy of Fordham University's Department of Chemistry, and Dr. W. G. Meinschein, of Esso Research and Engineering, an expert in organic and geochemistry.

The academic pot was really beginning to simmer now. Some scientists, both in America and abroad, welcomed the news excitedly. Others were skeptical. Most were interested, but reserved judgement. Then, in November, 1961, the lid was blown off entirely. Nagy and Dr. George Claus of New York University Medical Center announced the discovery of "microscopic-sized particles, resembling fossil algae" in two meteorites. Once-living cells, found inside meteorites! The obvious conclusion is that life has indeed blossomed elsewhere in space.

The conclusion is obvious. But is it correct?

Almost instantaneously with

the publication of Claus and Nagy's paper, the battle lines were drawn for a war of conflicting experiments and theories. Scientists of impressive stature have joined both the support and the opposition. The battle is still raging, and no definitive results can be expected for some time. At the core of the academic argument lie three basic questions:

1. Are the "particles" found by Claus and Nagy actually life forms?

2. If so, are they extra-terrestrial, or are they earthly forms that contaminated the meteorite after it fell on this planet?

3. If they are extra-terrestrial (not contaminants, but actual passengers aboard the meteorite), then where did they come from originally? The Moon? Mars? The planetoid belt? Or—most surprising of all—could they have originated on Earth itself?

Before examining these three questions and the varied answers that researchers have proposed for them, we should first understand the nature of the carbonaceous chondrites—the particular type of meteorite that seemingly bears the material of life.

CARBON CHONDRITES

THERE are basically two types of meteorites, metallic (predominantly iron) and stony, although many shadings of inter-

mediate mixtures have been found. Astronomers are divided in their opinion about the origin of the meteorites. The most likely sources would appear to be the planetoid belt between Mars and Jupiter, and the heads of comets that periodically sweep by the Earth. But even those astronomers who agree that the meteorites come mainly from the planetoid belt are disagreed on the question of whether the belt was once a sizable planet that somehow exploded, or whether the fragments represent the raw material for a planet that never coalesced.

An interesting piece of evidence for the latter view comes from the chondritic meteorites, which contain many solid spherical microscopic bodies, called "chondrules." The chondrites—as chondritic meteorites are called—are an intermediate type of meteorite, containing a mixture of iron-based metals and stones. It has been estimated that 84 percent of all the meteorites seen to fall are chondrites. Only 3.6 percent of them, however, are of the particular type of chondrite known as carbonaceous.

There is no known terrestrial process that can account for these meteorites' chondritic structure. Chondrules do not form under ordinary Earthly conditions. It appears very likely

that the chondrules were once individual droplets of matter that cooled and condensed into their spherical forms, and then gradually came together in interplanetary space to form the chondritic meteorites.

This explanation for their structure lends support to the concept that the meteorites were never part of a terrestrial-type planet. But contradictory evidence comes from the iron meteorites, which have structures that can be best explained by assuming that they were formed under immense pressures—such as those to be found deep within the interior of a planetary-sized body. Moreover, the very mixture of the types of meteorites—irons and stones—is quite similar to the mixture of the Earth's own stony crust and mantle and predominantly iron core. So the basic question of the origin of the meteorites is still very much in doubt.

The carbonaceous chondrites, until quite recently, were considered to be nothing more than a carbon-rich chondritic meteorite. The earliest reports on their chemical composition, dating from about 1952, showed that they were rich in both carbon and oxygen, and also had unexpectedly large amounts of nitrogen, hydrogen, sulphur and chlorine. Later analyses showed that they contained a good deal

of water chemically linked to the minerals of the meteorite in the form of hydrates.

One more point. There is probably no more than 100 pounds of carbonaceous chondritic material in all the world's laboratories and museums. This type of meteorite is rare, as we might expect a life-bearing interplanetary vehicle to be.

ARE THEY LIFE FORMS?

THE first of our three questions is the most fundamental: are the forms discovered in the meteorites actually the remnants of cells that were once alive?

Claus and Nagy, writing in the November 18, 1961, issue of *Nature*, state very directly: "Microscopic-sized particles, resembling fossil algae, were found to be present in relatively large quantities in the Orgueil and Ivuna carbonaceous meteorites."

They go on to describe five separate types of cell-like particles that resemble, but are not identical to, Earthly algae that live in water. The descriptions, photomicrographs and drawings are carefully detailed. The particles have varying shapes, some had tubular spines and protuberances projecting outward, others had furrows running across their length, or vacuoles and pores inside the main body. Their sizes ranged from 0.5 to 20 thou-

sandths of a millimeter. The meteorites in which these particles were found fell in Orgueil, southern France, in 1864, and in Ivuna, Tanganyika, in 1938.

As a check on their results, Claus and Nagy also examined several other meteorites—both carbonaceous chondrites and ordinary stones. In the chondrites Mighei (Russia, 1889) and Murray (Kentucky, 1950) they found traces of "poorly defined particles. In the non-carbonaceous Holbrook (Arizona, 1912) and Bruderheim (Alberta, 1960) they found none. Later they reported heavy concentrations of cellular particles also in the carbonaceous chondrites Alais (France, 1806) and Tonk (India, 1911).

Now for the opposition. Philip Morrison, professor of physics at Cornell and one of the originators of the concept of using radio telescopes to listen for intelligent signals from other stars (Project OZMA), gave Claus and Nagy's evidence a different interpretation.

According to Morrison, the particles found in the meteorites represent not once-living cells, but crystalline structures (which he quaintly titles "carbonaceous snowflakes") composed of organic material that are the intermediate step between self-replicating DNA-type molecules and full-fledged living cells. Morrison, then, views the particles as

veritable "missing links" between the first molecules of life and the earliest cells.

A more fundamental disagreement was voiced by Prof. Frank Fitch of the University of Chicago's Argonne Cancer Research Hospital, and Dr. Henry P. Schwarcz and Prof. Edward Anders, both of University of Chicago's Fermi Institute for Nuclear Studies. They examined samples from Orgueil and Ivuna and concluded that the particles discovered by Claus and Nagy are definitely *not* life forms. This conclusion is based mainly on two observations: (1) the particles were found to have a density considerably higher than that of terrestrial cellular organisms; and (2) the particles could be moved across the field of a microscope by a magnet, which shows that they must contain high amounts of iron-based compounds.

Against this objection, Nagy, Claus and Hennessy argued that the heavy magnetic particles were not the same particles that they had claimed to be life-like. They produced evidence to show that they, too, had seen the iron-based particles, together with the life-like particles. Their conclusion was that the University of Chicago team had independently discovered the inorganic particles and somehow failed to discover the organic ones.

Standing between these opposing groups of researchers is Prof. J. D. Bernal, a world-renowned expert in crystallography, physics and biochemistry. Bernal points out that the heavy, magnetic particles might well be fossil forms that have had a good deal of their organic material replaced by iron compounds, in a sort of petrification process. The Chicago team had considered this possibility, but rejected it out of hand.

On balance, though, it would appear that the particles are life forms, or at least, fossils of once-living cells. Several other researchers have declared themselves in favor of Claus and Nagy's conclusions, and have announced finding similar particles in other samples of carbonaceous chondrites.

ARE THEY EXTRATERRESTRIAL?

GRANTING, then, that the particles are life forms of some sort . . . are they truly extraterrestrial in origin, or are they merely the remnants of Earthly creatures that have contaminated the meteorites, since they fell to the ground?

Here, at least, everyone seems firmly agreed. The particles are not contaminants. In their original paper, Claus and Nagy carefully separated the known Earthly bacteria, algae and other contaminants in the meteorites from

the, seemingly - extraterrestrial particles. In their samples of the meteorites they found fewer than 50 Earthly forms per milligram of material, while at the same time more than 1600 extraterrestrial particles per milligram were counted in two separate samples of Orgueil and one of Ivuna. The proportions were similar in the later-examined Tonk and Alais samples.

This impressive evidence was more than enough to satisfy Prof. Harold C. Urey, of the University of California. A world-recognized figure for his work in geochemistry and his theories of the origin of the solar system, Urey points out that the number of extraterrestrial particles is about three million per cubic centimeter; he agrees that it is highly improbable that "such massive contamination with terrestrial organisms . . . could have occurred."

WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

SO far we have satisfied ourselves that the particles are life forms, and that they are unlike any life forms currently native to Earth. The question now is, where did they originate? This question really is: Where did the carbonaceous meteorites come from?

Consider the requirements for life. Life requires a building-block substance: carbon in the

case of Earth, and also in the meteorite life forms. Life also requires a solvent-medium: water on Earth, and—apparently—water in the meteorites; at least, the life forms resemble terrestrial species that require water. There was no free water in the meteorite samples, and the life forms were fossilized. Finally, life requires an energy-exchange mechanism. Some of the tests performed on the particles of the meteorites have led biochemists to believe that their biochemistry was essentially similar to that of Earthly life.

Now, where can these three requirements be met? We need a body that will hold liquid water. This implies a planetary-sized body, with a gravitational field strong enough to hold pools of water, and a temperature range in which water is liquid. Immediately we can rule out Jupiter and the other giant planets, further away from the Sun. Their temperatures are too low. There might be Jovian life forms, but they would be based on a totally alien, cryogenic ammonia biochemistry.

Venus and Mercury can both be dismissed as possible sources of the meteorites for two reasons. First, their temperatures are too high for terrestrial-type biochemistry on the planetary surfaces, where the meteorites would have to originate. Second,

it is difficult to envision meteorites working "uphill" against the Sun's gravitational field to travel from these two inner planets to Earth.

That leaves the planetoid belt, Mars, the Moon . . . and Earth itself. Urey has considered each of these possibilities, and come to some conclusions that are both intriguing and controversial—as are nearly all the theories generated in this area, to date.

THE PLANETOID BELT

IF the carbonaceous chondrites came from the planetoid belt, then we are faced anew with the question of whether the planetoids represent the fragments of an exploded planet or the raw material for a planet that never coalesced. Urey examines the possibility that the planetoids were once a fair-sized planet. First, if this planet orbited between Mars and Jupiter, its temperature would have been considerably cooler than Mars'. Since the Martian temperature is, at best, marginal for water-based life, a cooler planet might well be considered too cold for such life.

Moreover, if there was a planet and it exploded, where are the fragments? The planetoid belt represents only a very small total amount of material, not nearly enough for a planet of even Mars' small size. Of course, it could be

argued that most of the fragments have been "collected" over the course of millions of years by Jupiter, Mars and other planets. Certainly, Earth has had its share of meteorites.

However, if we are postulating a planet that once harbored life in shallow pools or seas, the carbonaceous chondrites do not support this assumption. Sea-bottom rocks have a characteristic, stratified appearance. The chondrites do not. In fact, as we have seen, the chondrites' structures resemble nothing known on Earth. This makes it appear unlikely that these meteorites were once part of a planet that contained open bodies of water. Urey also rejects the possibility that the meteorites were never part of a larger planet, but developed life independently within their own small masses. However, this conclusion has been challenged, as we shall see later.

MARS AND THE MOON

MARS is the most likely planet in the solar system, outside of Earth, to be a harbor for life. Is it possible that the chondrites originated on Mars, and were blasted from the planet in some gigantic meteor-strike, or volcanic upheaval? (Or deliberately launched by intelligent creatures?)

Although Mars is almost completely arid today, it could have

held oceans of considerable size during the first few million years of its existence. Life might have evolved there. It is not entirely unfeasible to picture some meteors torn loose from Mars, and the microscopic life forms within them going into the spore state and eventually dying and becoming fossilized. But does the evidence at hand bear out this picture?

Not very well. Again, if we require open bodies of water for life, then the rocks should bear evidence of sedimentation and weathering. The chondrites do not. Also, there is the question of the expected transit time between Earth and Mars as compared to the ages of the meteorites and the time they have spent in space. Astronomers can calculate the probable transit time of a body escaping from Mars and following a random orbit to reach Earth. The average time is about 100,000 years. If a group of rocks are started off on such an odyssey, they would hit the Earth after about 100,000 years of wandering through the shifting gravitational fields of the interplanetary wilderness.

The ages of the carbonaceous chondrites have been estimated through radioactive dating at about 4.5 billion years. This does not necessarily represent, however, the time since they left Mars (if they did). One could ar-

gue that this shows their age since they first solidified as a part of the Martian crust (again, if they did originally belong to Mars). Indeed, this age of 4.5 billion years is approximately the age of the formation of the Earth's solid crust, and may well be close to the age of the entire solar system.

However, it is possible to measure—through a different type of radioactive decay—the length of time that a meteorite has been subjected to cosmic radiation. In essence, this is a measurement of the time since the meteorite has had its surface exposed to space. The carbonaceous chondrites show “cosmic ray” ages of about 20 million years or more. This means that they have been in space for that length of time, at least. Thus, the average 100,000-year transit time from Mars to Earth is far exceeded. It appears extremely unlikely that these meteorites were once part of Martian soil.

Much the same reasoning can show that the chondrites could not have originated on the Moon. The average transit time is once again much shorter than the time the meteorites have actually been in space. Moreover, the Moon shows absolutely no signs of harboring any type of life. There is no water, and no evidence that water ever existed on the surface in liquid form. But

... there is a possibility that the meteorites might have "come from" the Moon, even if they did not "originate" there.

ROUND TRIP FROM EARTH?

ONE of the truths of science is that the terms "simple" and "far-fetched" should be used only with the utmost caution. Many an investigator has come up with a "simple" scheme that simply did not hold water; and many "far-fetched" ideas are today providing light, transportation, medical cures and entertainment around the world.

Urey has come up with an explanation for the carbonaceous chondrites that seems, to him at least, to be the simplest way of explaining the presence of life forms aboard these meteorites. To many other people, the simplicity of Urey's explanation is obscured by the staggering concepts that must be swallowed before the explanation can be digested.

Picture the scene that Urey paints: we see the Earth as it existed some four billion years ago. Our planet has just about completed forming a solid crust. Interplanetary space is heavily populated with debris—solidified chunks of matter similar to those that have aggregated into the planets and satellites. Some of these chunks are quite sizable—100 miles or more in diameter.

The Moon has formed at some distance from Earth as an independent minor planet. However, its orbit is unstable. Very quickly—on a cosmic time scale—the Moon is swept in toward the Earth and is captured. It becomes a satellite of our planet.

This activity, however, has caused severe gravitational perturbations throughout our region of the solar system. Much of the loose meteoric material is jarred out of semi-stable orbits and begins falling in toward the Earth-Moon system. The result of this primeval traffic can be seen on the Moon's battered face today. Even the Earth bears weathered, concealed, *astroblemes* literally, "star scars," hundred-mile-wide craters caused by the impact of tremendous meteorites. This pounding of the Earth and Moon went on for a considerable length of time; some of the craters of the Moon are clearly older than others. It can be imagined that life began to develop on Earth before this interplanetary "heavy artillery" stopped its cannonade.

Now then, picture a meteor weighing thousands of tons—a meteor of the type that caused the *Mare Imbrium* on the Moon; even bigger than the one that caused Barringer Crater in Arizona, or the 1908 meteorite that felled trees for 50 miles around when it hit Siberia like a mega-

ton bomb. Urey postulates that such super-sized meteorites struck the Earth hard enough to blast chunks of rock completely off this planet. And in those escaped rocks were trapped microscopic life forms. The rocks eventually were captured by the Moon and struck its dead surface. Perhaps some water was also splashed free of Earth, froze, and made its way to the Moon.

It does not really matter if the micro-organisms survived this journey or not. They rested on the Moon until another large meteorite jarred them loose again. In time, they completed their round trips and re-entered the Earth's atmosphere. Some of them have been seen to fall and have been recovered. They are the carbonaceous chondrites, bearing fossilized micro-organisms. The life forms that they bear, then, are ancient forms of Earthly life. It would be reasonable to suppose that these micro-fossils would resemble modern organisms, but the passage of millenia would have caused the organisms that remained on Earth to evolve into slightly different forms.

The plausibility of this Earth-Moon tennis game is a matter of subjective consideration. To Urey, it is a perfectly simple and straightforward concept. And it has the added attraction in his mind of placing the origin of the

life forms on Earth, where, as Urey puts it, "we know that life has evolved. . . ."

LIFE IN THE PLANETOLDS

WE know that life has evolved on Earth. But did it *originate* here? Urey implies that it did. But the discovery of meteor-borne life forms raises the question of whether Earth was "contaminated" with life forms from another source. Let us re-examine the possibility of having life-bearing meteors originate in the planetoids. Previously, this concept was dismissed because these small bits of rock could not bear liquid water on their surfaces. However, this is not the end of the story.

Prof. Bernal points out that a relatively small planetoid—perhaps a few hundred miles in diameter—might have held enough radioactive material to heat its central portions to several thousand degrees Fahrenheit. We have already seen that the carbonaceous chondrites contain significant amounts of water, in the form of hydrates. Now, picture a cross-section of such a chondrite as it might have existed in space at some unknown time in the past. Its center is radioactively heated. Its surface temperature is probably below freezing, particularly if it is at the distance from the Sun of the planetoid belt. There is, there-

fore, a zone between the center and the surface where water is in its liquid phase. There are plenty of organic chemicals present. There is both heat energy and electromagnetic radiation energy (predominantly gamma rays) available from the radioactive decay of potassium, uranium, and other elements.

In short, there is a possibility that the three basic requirements for life could have existed within the chondrites. Life could have evolved spontaneously there. It could never amount to much, simply because there was not much material nor energy available. But the critical steps leading up to, and including, the formation of unicellular organisms might have taken place.

Thus, life could arise on a planetoid, only to reach a natural limit and eventually die away. In time, the planetoid would break apart; some of the fragments would find their way to Earth and fall here, bearing their life forms with them. The "cosmic ray" ages of the chondrites are probably indicative of the time since they broke apart. Their chondritic structure is strong evidence that they were formed in space, and were never part of a large planet. The question then becomes: Did the life forms in the chondrites originate on Earth as Urey postulates? Or did Earthly life originate in the chondrites

and "contaminate" this planet?

"Perhaps the answer is, 'Neither.'"

THE one vital flaw in Urey's argument is the structure of the chondrites themselves. As we have seen, normal terrestrial rocks do not assume the chondritic form of structure. If terrestrial rocks were blasted loose from this planet, they should resemble terrestrial rocks, not chondrites. It is difficult to see how the internal-structure of the meteorites could have been changed from terrestrial to chondritic. So, it appears unlikely that the meteoric life forms originated on Earth.

But there are also serious problems to be faced before we can safely assume that the life forms originating in meteors are responsible for the evolution of life here on Earth.

First, it seems that life would have sprung up rather quickly in the meteors and planetoids—before the scant supply of radioactive metals was exhausted and the heat source died away. That means that the meteorites would have had to strike the Earth very early in this planet's history, perhaps even before there were large bodies of water available here to foster and nourish life.

Secondly, the life forms would have had to survive a trip through the Earth's atmosphere

and a sudden landing on the surface. As our own missile and satellite technology has shown, re-entry is a serious problem, but by no means unsolvable. The meteorites are actually very serviceable "re-entry vehicles." However, the sudden landing is another matter. The impact shock and heating might well be enough to kill even a tough bacteriological spore.

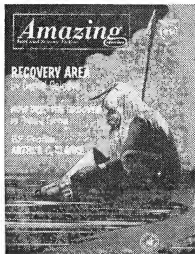
So "contamination" of Earth with life forms from the meteor-

ites is an open question, at best. On the other hand, enough is now known about the Earth's early history and biochemistry to enable scientists to postulate the origin of life on this planet without extra-terrestrial assistance. It appears possible, then, that life has no single origin, but can arise in a variety of places, under a surprising variety of conditions, and at any time that is opportune.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

A story destined to become a classic headlines the February issue.



It is *Recovery Area*, by **Daniel Galouye** (cover, 1). Novella-length, brilliantly original, and with a depth of meaning and emotion, it tells the tale of man's first expedition to Venus, and of the quazehorned creatures who awaited them there. It's a story not to miss.

Also in the February **AMAZING**, Sam Moskowitz profiles the famous sf writer **Arthur C. Clarke**; **Philip Jose Farmer** examines the problems of controlled genetics in *How Deep the Grooves*; and there will be other stories as well as our regular features.

February AMAZING on sale at newsstands January 10.



*Through generations
the power has descended,
now weaker, now stronger.
And which way did the
power run in the four-year-old
in the garden, playing
with a pie plate?*

the putnam tradition

By S. DORMAN

Illustrated by SCHELLING

IT was an old house not far from the coast, and had descended generation by generation to the women of the Putnam family. Progress literally went by it: a new four-lane highway had been built two hundred yards from the ancient lilacs at the doorstep. Long before that, in the time of Cecily Putnam's husband, power lines had been run in, and now on cold nights the telephone wires sounded like a concert of cellos, while inside

with a sound like the breaking of beetles, the grandmother Cecily moved through the walls in the grooves of tradition.

Simone Putnam, her granddaughter; Nina Putnam, her great-granddaughter; the unbroken succession of matriarchs continued, but times the old woman thought that in Simone it was weakened, and she looked at the four year old Nina askance, waiting, waiting, for some good sign.

Sometimes one of the Putnam women had given birth to a son, who grew sickly and died, or less often, grew healthy and fled. The husbands were usually strangers to the land, the house, and the women, and spent a lifetime with the long-lived Putnam wives, and died, leaving their strange signs: telephone wires, electric lights, water pumps, brass plumbing.

Sam Harris came and married Simone, bringing with him an invasion of washer, dryer, toaster, mixer, coffeemaker, until the current poured through the walls of the house with more vigor than the blood in the old woman's veins.

"You don't approve of him," Simone said to her grandmother.

"It's his trade," Cecily Putnam answered. "Our men have been carpenters, or farmers, or even schoolmasters. But an engineer. Phui!"

Simone was washing the dishes, gazing out across the windowsill where two pink and white Murex shells stood, to the tidy garden beyond where Nina was engaged in her private games.

She dried the dishes by passing her hand once above each plate or glass, bringing it to a dry sparkle. It saved wear on the dishtowels, and it amused her.

"Sam's not home very much," she said in a placating voice. She herself had grown terrified, since her marriage, that she wouldn't be able to bear the weight of her past. She felt its power on her and couldn't carry it. Cecily had brought her up, after her father had disappeared and her mother had died in an unexplained accident. Daily she saw the reflection of her failure in the face of her grandmother, who seemed built of the same seasoned and secure wood as the old Putnam house. Simone looked at her grandmother, whom she loved, and became a mere vapor.

"He's not home so much," Simone said.

HER face was small, with a pointed chin, and she had golden-red hair which she wore loose on her shoulders. Nina, too, had a small face, but it was neither so pale nor so delicate as her mother's, as if Sam's tougher substance had filled her out and strengthened her bone structure.

If it was true that she, Simone, was a weak link, then Sam's strength might have poured into the child, and there would be no more Putnam family and tradition.

"People don't change that easily," the old woman said.

"But things—" Simone began. The china which had a history of five generations slipped out of her hands and smashed; Sam's toaster wouldn't toast or pop up; Simone couldn't even use the telephone for fear of getting a wrong number, or no number at all.

"Things, things!" her grandmother cried. "It's blood that counts. If the blood is strong enough, things dissolve. They're just garbage, all those things, floating on the surface of our history. It's our history that's deep. That's what counts."

"You're afraid of Sam," the young woman accused.

"Not afraid of any man!" Cecily said, straightening her back. "But I'm afraid for the child. Sam has no family tradition, no depth, no talent handed down and perfected. A man with his head full of wheels and wires."

Simone loved him. She leaned on him and grew about him, and he supported her tenderly. She wasn't going to give him up for the sake of some abstract tradition—

"—it's not abstract," her grandmother said with spirit. "It's in your blood. Or why don't you sweep the floors the way other women do? The way Sam's mother must?"

Simone had begun to clean the house while she was thinking, moving her hand horizontally across the floor, at the height of her hip, and the dust was following the motion of her hand and moving in a small, sun-brightened river toward the trash basket in the kitchen corner. Now Simone raised her hand to her face to look at it, and the river of dust rose like a serpent and hung a foot below her hand.

"Yes," she agreed, "at least I can clean the house. If I don't touch the good china, and look where I'm going."

"Phui," the old woman said again, angrily. "Don't feel so sorry for yourself."

"Not for myself," Simone mumbled, and looked again toward the garden where her daughter was doing something with three stones and a pie plate full of spring water.

"I do despair of Nina," Cecily said, as she had said before. "She's four, and has no appearance. Not even balance. She fell out of the apple tree, and couldn't even help herself." Suddenly the old woman thrust her face close to her granddaughter. It was smooth, round, and sweet

as a young kernel of corn. The eyes, sunk down under the bushy grey brows, were cold and clear grey.

"Simone," the old woman said. "You didn't lie to me? You did know she was falling, and couldn't get back in time to catch her?"

A shudder passed through Simone's body. There was no blood in her veins, only water; no marrow in her bones, they were empty, and porous as a bird's. Even the roots of her hair were weak, and now the sweat was starting out on her scalp as she faced her grandmother and saw the bristling shapes of seven generations of Putnam women behind her.

"You lied," the old woman said. "You didn't know she was falling."

Simone was a vapor, a mere froth blowing away on the first breeze.

"My poor dear," the old woman said in a gentle voice. "But how could you marry someone like Sam? Don't you know what will happen? He'll dissolve us, our history, our talents, our pride. Nina is nothing but an ordinary little child."

"She's a good child," Simone said, trying not to be angry. She wanted her child to be loved, to be strong. "Nina isn't a common child," she said, with her head bent. "She's very bright."

"A man with his head full of wheels, who's at home with electricity and wires," the old woman went on. "We've had them before, but never allowed them to dominate us. My own husband was such a man, but he was only allowed to make token gestures, such as having the power lines put in. He never understood how they worked." She lowered her voice to a whisper, "Your Sam understands. I've heard him talk to the water pump."

"That's why you're afraid of him," Simone said. "Not because I'm weak, and he might take something away from me, but because he's strong, and he might give us something. Then everything would change, and you're afraid of that. Nina might be our change." She pointed toward the garden.

FOLLOWING the white line of her granddaughter's finger, Cecily looked out into the garden and saw Nina turn toward them as though she knew they were angry. The child pointed with one finger directly at them in the house. There was a sharp crackle, and something of a brilliant and vibrating blue leaped between the out-stretched fingers of mother and daughter, and flew up like a bird to the power lines above.

"Mommy," Nina called.

Simone's heart nearly broke with wonder and fright. Her

grandmother contemptuously passed through the kitchen door and emerged on the step outside, but Simone opened the door and left it open behind her. "What was that?" she asked Nina. "Was it a bluebird?"

"Don't be silly," Nina said. She picked up the pie plate and brought it toward them. Cecily's face was white and translucent, one hand went to her throat as the child approached.

Brimfull of crackling blue fire with a fluctuating heart of yellow, the pie plate came toward them, held between Nina's small, dusty hands. Nina grinned at them. "I stole it out of the wires," she said.

Simone thought she would faint with a mixture of joy and fear. "Put it back," she whispered. "Please put it back."

"Oh Mommy," Nina said, beginning to whine. "Not now. Not right away. I just got it. I've done it lots of times." The pie plate crackled and hissed in the steady, small hands.

Simone could feel the old woman's shocked silence behind her. "You mustn't carry it in a pie plate, it's dangerous," Simone said to her child, but she could see Nina was in no danger. "How often have you done this?" She could feel her skirt and her hair billow with electricity.

"Lots of times. You don't like it, do you?" She became teasing

and roguish, when she looked most like Sam. Suddenly she threw back her head and opened her mouth, and tilting up the pie plate she drank it empty. Her reddish gold hair sprang out in crackling rays around her face, her eyes flashed and sparks flew out between her teeth before she closed her mouth.

"Nina!" the old woman cried, and began to crumple, falling slowly against Simone in a complete faint. Simone caught her in trembling hands and lowered her gently. She said to her daughter, "You mustn't do that in front of Grandy. You're a bad girl, you knew it would scare her," and to herself she said: I must stop babbling, the child knows I'm being silly. O isn't it wonderful, isn't it awful, O Sam, how I love you.

"Daddy said it would scare you," Nina admitted. "That's why I never showed you before." Her hair was softly falling into place again, and she was gazing curiously at her great-grandmother lying on the doorstep.

"It did scare me," Simone said. "I'm not used to it, darling. But don't keep it secret any more."

"Is Grandy asleep?"

Simone said hastily, "Oh yes, she's taking a nap. She is old, you know, and likes to take naps."

"That's not a nap," Nina said,

leaning over and patting the old woman's cheek, "I think she's having a bad dream."

Simone carried her grandmother into the house. If that old, tired heart had jumped and floundered like her own, there must be some damage done to it. If anything happened to her grandmother, the world would end, Simone thought, and was furious with Nina, and at the same time, full of joy for her.

Cecily Putnam opened her eyes widely, and Simone said, "It does change, you see. But it's in the family, after all."

The old woman sat upright quickly. "That wicked child!" she exclaimed. "To come and frighten us like that. She ought to be spanked." She got up with great strength and rushed out to the garden.

"Nina!" she called imperiously. The child picked up one of the small stones from the pie plate now full of spring water, and

came to her great-grandmother.

"I'll make something for you, Grandy," she said seriously. She put the stone in the palm of her hand, and breathed on it, and then held out her hand and offered the diamond.

"It's lovely. Thank you," the old woman said with dignity, and put her hand on the child's head. "Let's go for a walk and I'll show you how to grow rose-apples. That's more becoming to a young lady."

"You slept on the step."

"Ah! I'm old and I like to take little naps," Cecily answered.

Simone saw them disappear among the applerose trees side by side. She was still trembling, but gradually, as she passed her hand back and forth, and the dust followed, moving in a sparkling river toward the trash basket, Simone stopped trembling and began to smile with the natural pride of a Putnam woman.

THE END

(Continued from page 5)

tween the two form the pattern that the scanner transmits to Earth. At least, that's all the Air Force is saying right now.

The bio-telescanner works in null-gravity; can be turned on and off by signals from Earth if the astronaut is otherwise occupied; can record its data on tape for re-transmission; or it can be

sent on ahead to new planets by itself in a space probe, and automatically gather soil and air samples to determine the feasibility of a manned landing.

All in all, the bio-telescanner seems like a handy gadget. But I wonder how the biochemists feel at being so rudely obsoleted?—N. L.

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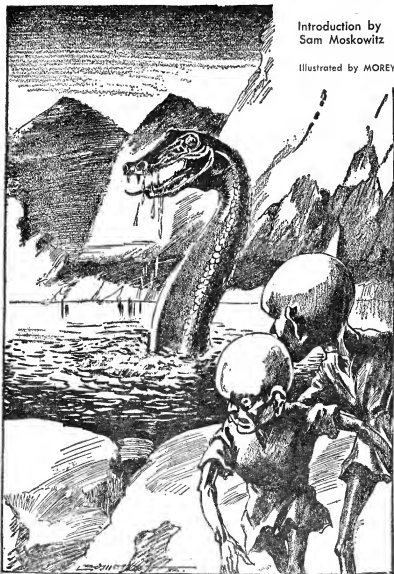
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A Classic Reprint from AMAZING STORIES, January, 1933

Introduction by
Sam Moskowitz

Illustrated by MOREY



OMEGA, the MAN

By LOWELL HOWARD MORROW

THIS story is science fiction in the epic tradition. The tremendous power of the plot is generated by its fundamental truth. The story is so strong that one has to step back a pace to focus on the allegory.

In the parched Earth of tomorrow, the end-product of man's evolution and culture, the last remaining man and woman, fight a grim battle with a prehistoric beast for possession of the only remaining body of water on the planet. This is a war between a supremely intelligent creature with all the techniques of science at his command and a nearly mindless brute with only physical power and instinct to guide it and yet we see the battle is far from unequal.

The contest is so thrilling and the contrast so vivid, that as events unfold we lose sight of the fact that what is involved is simply man against nature. Regardless of how far man progresses, the struggle will never cease.

If nature were all man had to fight, the issue would be clear cut, but as the story progresses

we realize that events symbolize man's own prodigality. His unthinking waste of natural resources and the overpowering realization that ultimately his own creations point the path to his extinction.

There are some weak premises in the science of the story but there are also some very brilliant ones. This author in 1932, sure-footedly traces the future of mankind; predicts the precise utilization of atomic energy; the population pressures that drove men out to the planets; the evolutionary changes that would occur in the human body due to the increasingly artificial mode of life and such a richness of other speculation that the very thoroughness of it threatens to detract from the story.

Previous to Omega, The Man, all but one of Lowell Howard Morrow's stories had dealt with man's future in the atmosphere and were contributed to AIR WONDER STORIES. They had been adequate for the time but scarcely distinguished. Omega, the Man was his last contribution to any

science fiction magazine and it was as though it represented the cumulative total of his imagination fitted into one package.

The immediate effect of the story was so great that the leading science fiction fan magazine of the period, FANTASY MAGAZINE, solicited from Mr. Morrow an article titled The Story Behind the Story of "Omega, The Man," which it published in its June, 1934 number. The story grew out of a dream of "Indefinable, mysteries and awful monsters crawling, twisting squirming out of the horizon of darkness . . . With grey dry lips that smacked open and shut with grisly clatter . . . these creatures writhed toward a common center—the earth's last water—

cupped in the bed of a vanished sea. Then suddenly there appeared the wan figure of a man. Alone, majestic in his might as the last lord of all, he rose from beside the lake." The dream was based on Morrow's return to the lakes of Northern Michigan that he remembered as a child, to find them swamps or entirely dry.

"Knowing that all earthly life must eventually come to an end it has been one of my pleasant diversions to wonder about it. I have tried to picture the last of humanity following the receding waters across the hot sands, to speculate about the nature of the last man, to read his thoughts as he comes to stand alone in that abysmal moment of life's extinction." The results are memorable.

THE silver airship cut swiftly through the hot thin air. The noonday sun blazed down upon it and the desert world below. All about was the solemn silence of death. No living thing appeared either in the air or on the drab, gray earth. Only the aircraft itself displayed any signs of life. The sky, blue as indigo, held not the shadow of a cloud, and on the horizon the mountains notched into it like the teeth of a giant saw.

The airship finally came to a hovering stop, then dropped rapidly toward the salt-encrusted

plain. It came to rest at last on the bottom of a great, bowl-shaped hollow situated at the end of a chasm whose gray, rock-strewn sides rose in rugged terraces for miles back into the sky. In a few moments a panel in the vessel's side rolled noiselessly upward, disclosing a brilliant light, and from the interior of the airship soon appeared two figures who paused at the aperture and gazed out over the parched earth. Then without fear or visible effort—although they were seventy-five feet above the ground—they emerged from the

ship and floated down to earth.

These two humans—the sole survivors of all earth's children—were man and wife—Omega and Thalma. They were burned a deep cherry by the fierce rays of the sun. In stature they were above the average man now on earth. Their legs were slender and almost fleshless, because for many centuries man had ceased to walk. Their feet were mere toeless protuberances attached to the ankle bone. Their arms were long and as spare as their legs, but their hands, although small, were well-proportioned and powerful. Their abdominal regions were very small, but above them were enormous chests sheltering lungs of tremendous power, for thus nature had armored man against the rarefaction of the earth's atmosphere. But the most remarkable parts about this truly remarkable couple were there massive heads set upon short, slim necks. The cranial development was extraordinary, their bulging foreheads denoting great brain power. Their eyes—set wide apart—were large and round, dark and luminous with intelligence and their ears were remarkably large, being attuned to all the music and voices of life. While their nostrils were large and dilated, their mouths were very small, though sensuous and full-lipped. They were entirely hairless—for even the

eyebrows and the eyelashes of man had entirely disappeared ages before. And when they smiled they betrayed no gleam of teeth, for nature had long discarded teeth in man's evolution.

The great, silver ship of the sky, now rested in a deep pocket on the floor of an ancient sea. Millions of years, under the sucking energy of the sun and the whip of many winds, had sapped its waters, until only a shallow, brackish lake remained. Along the shores of this lake, which covered scarcely more than a hundred acres, a rim of yellowish, green grass followed the water's edge and struggled against the inevitable, and here and there among the grasses flowers of faded colors and attenuated foliage reared their heads bravely in the burning sunshine. And this lone lake, nestled in the lowest spot among the mountains and valleys which once flooded the Pacific, now held the last of earth's waters. Barren and lifeless the rest of the world baked under a merciless sun.

NOW clasping hands, like children at play, Omega and Thalma approached the lake. They glided over the ground, merely touching their feet to the highest points, and finally stopped with their feet in the warm, still water.

Omega ran his cupped hand through the water, then drank eagerly.

"It is good," he said in a low, musical voice. "And there is much of it. Here we may live a long time."

Thalma laughed with sheer joy, her large, red-rimmed eyes aglow with mother light and love.

"I am glad," she cried. "I know that Alpha will be happy here."

"It is so, my love, and—"

Omega checked and stared out over the glassy lake. A spot in its center was stirring uneasily. Great bubbles rose to the surface and eddied to one side, then suddenly huge cascades of water shot into the air as if ejected by subterranean pressure. As they stared in silent astonishment the commotion suddenly ceased and the surface of the lake became as tranquil as before.

"There is volcanic action out there," said Omega fearfully. "At any time the ground may open and engulf the lake in a pit of fire. But no, that cannot be," he added, staring at Thalma an odd light in his eyes. For he suddenly recalled that no volcanic action or earth tremor had disturbed the surface crust for ages.

"What is it, Omega?" she whispered in accents of awe.

"Nothing to fear, my dear, I

am sure," he replied, averting his eyes. "Likely some fissure in the rock has suddenly opened."

And then he embraced her in the joy of new-found life. For long ages mind had communicated with mind by telepathic waves, speech being used for its cheer and companionship.

"We will make ready for Alpha," said Omega joyfully. "In very truth he may be able to carry on. Moisture may return to earth, and it is more likely to return here than elsewhere. Remember what the Mirror showed last week over the Sahara plains—the makings of a cloud!"

They cheered each other by this remembrance how just before they had consumed the last of the water in their recent home and buried the last of their neighbors and friends the reflecting Mirror had brought a view of a few stary wisps of vapor above the Great Sahara which once had been reclaimed by man, where teeming millions in by-gone ages had lived their lives.

"The inclination of the earth's axis is changing as we know," he went on hopefully as they turned back toward the ship. "The moisture may come back."

His was the voice of hope but not of conviction. Hope, planted in man's soul in the beginning, still burned brightly in these last stout hearts.

Alpha was still unborn. Omega and Thelma had willed a male child. In him was to be the beginning of a new race which they hoped with the aid of science would repeople the earth. Hence his name, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, of which "omega" is the last.

"I am afraid, my love," said Thelma, looking back over her shoulder at the placid lake. "I wonder what heaved the water about that way."

"Don't worry about it, my dear," he said as they paused beneath the ship and he put his arm protectingly about her. "As I have said, it probably was the shifting of a rock on the bed of the lake. It is nothing to worry about, and I feel that we have nothing to fear for a long, long time. And we have so much joy to look forward to. Remember Alpha is coming, and think of his glorious future! Think of his changing all this!" And he swept his hand toward the grim, gray hills. "Just think of again gardenizing the world!"

IT was indeed a dreary view upon which they gazed. On every side, upon the mountains and hills, over salt-encrusted plains and upon the rocks, were the skeletons and shells of departed life. Fossils of the animal and the vegetable kingdoms greeted one on every hand. Great

fronds of palms of the deep, draped with weird remains of marine life long extinct, stood gaunt and desolate and rust-covered in the hollows and on the hills. Long tresses of sea weed and moss, now crisp and dead as desert sands, still clung in wreaths and festoons to rock and tree and plant just as they had done in that far-off age, when washed by the waters of the sea. Great forests of coral, once white and pink and red with teeming life but now drab and dead, still thrust their arms upward, their former beauty covered and distorted by the dust of the ages. Whales and sharks and serpents and fish of divers species' and sizes, together with great eels and monsters of the deep, lay thickly over the land, their mummified remains shriveled by the intense heat, their ghastliness softened by the ashes of the years.

Millions of ages had rolled away since the struggle began—the battle of life on earth against the encroachments of death. And now death stalked everywhere, grinning with malicious triumph, for he had but one more battle to fight. Already his grisly clutch was closing on the standard of victory. Man had mastered life but he had not conquered death. With the magic wand of science he had reached out into space and viewed the

life of far-off worlds. He had routed superstition and fear and selfishness. He had banished disease and learned all nature's secrets; had even visited other worlds and had come to know and understand his God, but still death had marched grimly on. For even the abysmal moment of creation had marked the world for his prey. Slowly but surely death had closed his cold hands about the earth. The sun flung forth his hot rays and drew more and more of the earth's moisture and dissipated it in space. Gradually the forests vanished and then the streams and lakes dwindled and disappeared. By this time the atmosphere had thinned almost imperceptibly—and only by the aid of his scientific instruments had man been able to detect its thinning. Less and less rain fell, and finally even the ice-caps about the poles trickled away. Cold and gaunt and shadowy those regions lay silent and lifeless throughout the long nights, and loomed like gray ghosts in the hushed light of the summer. The sun blazed on relentlessly and the shores of the seven seas receded age after age, but with his science and his machines man had doggedly followed the retreating waters, husbanded and harnessed them and thus retained his grip on life.

But now at last life on earth had come to its final battlefield.

The plans of the battle were sharply drawn, but there could be no doubt of the issue. No one knew this better than Omega, for the sun shone on with undiminished power. Yet the rotation of the earth had slackened until twenty-five hours constituted a day, while the year was 379 days and a fraction in length. Man, gradually adjusting himself to the new conditions and environment, had triumphed even in the face of a losing fight. For he had learned to smile into the hollow sockets of death, to laugh at the empty promises of life.

BACK in their ship Omega and Thalma gazed out over the dead world, where the salt crystals gleamed and sparkled in the sunshine.

"Will all this ever become green again and full of joy and life?" asked Thalma wearily.

"Why not?" asked Omega. "Although the race has come to its last stand, water is here and before it is gone who knows what may happen?"

Omega spoke only to please his wife, for well he knew in his heart that the star of hope had forever set. And always he was thinking of that commotion in the waters of the lake. What could have caused it? What did it portend? He was sure that the answer was to be one of tragedy.

"We know that for uncounted

ages the world was green and beautiful, was vibrant with life and joy," he went on. "And why may it not be so again, even though now it is garbed in the clothes of the sepulchre? Let us trust in the power of our son."

Thalma did not answer, and Omega, seeing that she was terribly depressed, fell silent. So they sat in their great airship, strangely dejected despite the close proximity of the life-giving water, while the sun flamed through the cloudless sky and set in a crimson flood beyond the lifeless plains. Night fell but still they sat brooding. The stars shone out in the purple heavens, but they noticed not their glory. The ship was wrapped in an awful silence. No night wind whispered its message nor warmed the cold, desolate earth, stretching down from the poles, nor cooled the hot wastes about the equator. The naked mountains rose stark and forbidding into the sky, which hung like a great, bejeweled bowl over the sun-scorched plains, where the dust of many ages lay undisturbed. The shadows lay deep and dark over the valleys and among the streets of cities dead and silent for many ages, and searched out deep chasms which when the world was young had felt the surge of the restless seas. No form of life winged its way through the darkness and called to its

mate. No beast of prey rent the air with its challenge. No insect chirped. No slimy shape crawled over the rocks. Dark and solemn, mysterious and still, the earth sped on through the night.

* * *

Morning found them in much better spirits. Over their breakfast, which consisted almost wholly of food in tablet form, they discussed their plans. After which they went to the lookout in the bow of the ship and gazed out at the gray world. There was no change. The same heart-breaking monotony of death confronted them. But despite it all they finally smiled into each other's eyes.

"It is home," said Omega proudly. "The last home we shall ever know."

"My God, look!" suddenly gasped Thalma, clutching his arm and pointing a trembling finger toward the lake. "What—is that?"

Following her gesture he stared in terror and stupefaction. Rising above the center of the lake where the day before they had beheld the agitated waters, was an enormous, scale-covered neck surmounted by a long, snake-like head whose round, red eyes were sheltered beneath black, horny hoods. The horrible creature's head was swaying back and forth as its

black tongue darted in and out between wide-open jaws displaying single rows of sharp teeth. Fully fifteen feet above the lake the awful eyes looked toward the land. And as the neck moved in unison with the swaying head the scales seemed to slide under and over one another a perfect armor for the neck.

"A plesiosaurian!" exclaimed Omega, leveling his glasses at the beast. "No—how can that be?" he added in bewilderment. "Those monsters were supposed to be extinct ages ago. And they had a smooth skin, while this thing has scales, like those of a brontosaurus, which was really a land animal. This must be a cross between the two that through the process of evolution has been developed. Anyway it is the last of the species and it has come here—to die."

"Like us it has followed the water and come here to die," said Thalma as she also leveled glasses.

For several minutes they watched the swaying head which every little while twisted from side to side, as the blazing eyes seemed to be searching for prey, while a whitish saliva dripped from the jaws. The body of the beast, which they knew to be enormous, was hidden beneath the water, but the agitation on the surface showed that powerful feet and legs were stirring.

"Yes, it has come here to die," repeated Omega, "to fight for the last drop of earth's water. It now has possession of the lake, and unless we kill it, it will kill us or drive us away."

Almost with the words Omega seized an atomic gun and pointed it at the brute's head. But before he could sight the weapon and pull the trigger the monster, as though sensing danger, suddenly jerked down its head and a moment later it had disappeared beneath the surface.

"It has gone!" cried Thalma. She was trembling as with a chill, and her eyes were wide with terror.

"It will appear again," said Omega, "and then we will kill it, for the water belongs to man. Doubtless that huge beast is all that remains of life on earth save ourselves. To-night while you sleep here in the ship, I will take a gun, take position behind a rock on the shore of the lake and watch for its appearance. I think shortly after nightfall when the rocks are cool it leaves the water and comes on land in a vain search for food, for beyond a doubt it has devoured everything in the lake, save marine mosses and the like. Yet as it has survived all contemporary life except man, it may live for centuries unless we destroy it."

"But there are not centuries of water out there," Thalma said.

"As to your hunting this monster alone, I will not hear of it. I shall go with you. Together we will destroy this menace of our new home."

ALL Omega's eloquence could not dissuade her. So, after the sun had set and the dry cold had chilled the hot rocks, they set out along the shore of the lake and looked eagerly out over the still water for a sight of their enemy. Nothing disturbed the silvery surface of the water. Crouching behind a mass of coral they waited, but throughout the long, still night they watched without reward, for nothing moved within their range of vision. The stars, wonderfully large and brilliant in that rarefied atmosphere, seemed to be the only link between them and the unknown. Only their own hurried breathing and the muffled thumps of their wildly beating hearts broke the silence. And as the sun rose again above the dead plains, weary and discouraged they returned to the ship.

While keeping up a bold front for Thalma's sake, Omega's heart was sad, for he well knew that unless they could vanquish that marine monster they were doomed. That such a dreadful creature had come to them from the mists of antiquity, as it were, was incredible. Yet he had seen

it, Thalma had seen it, and it resembled some of the sea monsters he had heard of in the past. They could not doubt its existence and must prepare for the worst.

Omega's name had been conferred on him by an ironical whim of fate. When he was born there were still many people on earth inhabiting the low valleys of the Pacific's floor where much water still remained. But the droughts had increased with the years, and before Omega had reached middle-life all rain had ceased to fall. The atmosphere became so rare, even near the ground, that it was difficult for the people with the aid of their machines to draw sufficient oxygen and nitrogen from it to prepare the food which had been man's principal sustenance for ages.

Gradually the weaker peoples had succumbed. But the remnants of the nations gathered about the receding waters, all foreseeing the end, but all determined to defer it as long as possible. There was no recourse. For ages before Omega was born the nations, knowing that the earth was drying up, had fought one another for the privilege of migrating to another planet to fight its inhabitants for its possession. The battle had been so bitterly contested that two-thirds of the combatants were slain. By the

aid of their space-cars the victors colonized other planets in our solar system leaving the vanquished on earth to shift for themselves. There was nothing for them to do but to fight on and await the end, for no space-car that man had ever devised was able to penetrate the cold, far-reaches of space. Only among the family of our own sun could he navigate his ships. And now, like the earth, every member of that once glorious family was dead or dying. For millions of years, Mars, his ruddy glow gone forever, had rolled through space, the tomb of a mighty civilization. The ashes of Venus were growing cold. Life on Mercury, Jupiter and Saturn already was in the throes of dissolution, and the cold, barren wastes of Uranus and Neptune always had forbidden man.

So it seemed that the name, Omega, had been fittingly bestowed. More than ever the stark truth made him shudder with apprehension, and he felt that only the coming of Alpha would give him strength to carry on.

"Now we must make ready for Alpha," said Omega, even while thoughts of the sea-monster chilled his heart. "We will make our servants prepare the way. Here in this valley must be born a new race of men. Life must come from death. Come, Thalma."

SHE smiled back at him, reassured by his confident manner, and together they entered a lower compartment of the ship. This compartment contained the servants of which Omega had spoken—divers machinery and other marvels of man's construction. Omega touched several buttons and a section of the ship's hull rolled aside. He pressed other buttons and whirled wheels. Then great sections of mirror slid out into the air and without apparent direction or control they ranged themselves far up on a steep hillside. Yet all were under perfect control. With invisible, atomic rays Omega made all do his bidding. For countless centuries man had mastered the atom, divided it, harnessed its electrons. Following the discoveries of the great French scientist, Becquerel, man had learned that the potential energy of all atoms—especially that of radium—is almost limitless. And as the disintegration of the atom carries an electrical discharge, man had learned to control this energy. Omega's machines, utilizing atoms from everywhere, even the ether, split them by radio-activity through electromagnetic waves, and utilized the energy of their electrons which always move in fixed orbits. There being forty radio-active substances, Omega took advantage of them all, and equalizing

the atomic weight of the atoms—whether those around a hydrogen nucleus or a helium nucleus—he broke the atoms down and directed the charges of their electrons. Then his motors amplified the discharges and, through the medium of an electric current, projected them in the form of invisible atomic rays which he could control and direct against any object and sustain and move at will by means of oscillating currents.

Soon upon the hillside, perfectly arranged and adjusted, appeared a giant, parabolic, refracting mirror with which he could obtain a view of any portion of the earth's surface by sending vibrating currents around the world and reproducing impressions already recorded on the ether, on the surface of the mirror. And beneath its center was a receiver, through which drew their energy both minutest sound around the world, had there been any to hear.

The small, atomic motors—which drew their energy both from hydrogen nuclei, the ether of space and the radio-active substances of all metals—now were placed on the hillside near the great mirror. Their motors were capable of creating and focusing light, without bulb or other container, whenever and wherever needed. All were operated with

scarcely any effort by Omega.

In a measure it seemed strange that the Greek alphabet and all the classics of the ancients had survived antiquity. But the latest inventions of man explained it all. For man with his machines had reached far back into the shadowy past and proved the immortality of all thought and action. All the records of history, all the triumphs and defeats, the joys and sorrows and aspirations of humanity, came out of the past and marched across the screen of his historical recorder. As nothing is ever lost, all sounds and impressions occurring on earth since the dawn of its creation, being already impressed on the sensitive plastic and all-pervading ether, the same as a photograph is recorded on its film or plate, man had developed a machine for drawing on these impressions until at will the history of the world was before him. Even the varied life of the ancients came out of the past. Saints and sinners, slaves and masters mingled. Confucius sat before him in humility; Guatama counseled his followers to be humble; Christ died upon the cross. Warriors and statesmen shouted their triumphs and bewailed their defeats. Philosophers expounded their wisdom and Socrates drank the hemlock. Hannibal and Caesar and Alexander fought their battles, and

Napoleon marched gory and unafraid from Austerlitz to Waterloo. All came back at the call of Omega's science.

AS has been stated it was a giant craft on which Omega and Thalma had come to this last retreat of man. Within its interior were all the latest marvels of man's ingenuity and skill. These instruments of almost supernatural power not only reached back into the past but also penetrated the future. There was a great atomic-electric motor used in creating and controlling climate as long as there was any to control. Sending forth electro-magnetic waves it massed and directed the atmospheric pressure, sending heat waves here, cold ones there, thus causing droughts and rainfall at will. But now, as with the case of most of the other machines, Omega needed it no longer. He kept it because it linked him with the joy of the past. Besides, there was the mind-control appliance by whose aid man's mind might visit other worlds. This was done through the development of the subconscious and the discipline of the will. But Omega was weary of these pilgrimages, because his body could not perform those far-off flights. As time went on he realized that the earth was his natural home. Even the earth's neighbors, dead

and dying, offered him no haven.

Yes, Omega and Thalma had garnered the gist of the world's treasures before commencing this last trek. Gold and precious stones were common objects to them, because for countless ages man had made them at will, but around those they had brought clustered sacred memories of loved ones gone before. The biological machine in the chemical laboratory of the ship—the machine that brought forth life from nature's bountiful storehouse—was of little use now that both atmosphere and moisture were nearly gone. Yet Omega cherished this machine, and aside from its associations with the past, it held for him a fascination that he could not understand.

Having set the mirror and other mechanical servants in position, Omega and Thalma returned to the ship, and slept throughout the day, for with the descending sun they must again go forth to hunt that scaly demon which had taken possession of the earth's last water.

The night was moonless, but the bright starlight brought all objects into plain relief against the dark rocks. Taking position on the slope several rods above the beach, Omega and Thalma watched the lake eagerly, but nothing disturbed its mirror-like surface. As on the preceding

night the awful silence appalled them—even though they were accustomed to the vast solitude. It was so calm and still, so full of death and mystery, that it seemed they must cry out in the agony of their emotions. As the very silence was crushing their spirits so the knowledge that only one form of life on earth stood between them and the water to which their last hope clung, was maddening. How they longed to battle the hideous monster! But the hours dragged on with nothing to disturb the dead, heart-breaking silence. At last the Great Dipper had swung so far around that dawn appeared. Yet there had been not a ripple on the lake. Omega concluded that his guess was wrong—the beast did not leave the water at night to search for food. Perhaps it had learned the futility of such a search in a dead, dust-covered world.

WEARIED by their long and fruitless vigil they must have dozed, for suddenly Omega, who sat but a yard or two from Thalma, was aroused by a padded footfall and the exhalations of a noisome breath. Looking up he was horrified to see the monster towering above him, its head swaying gently to and fro, as its great, awkward feet sent it lunging forward and backward for many feet, its spotted, scale-cov-

ered body trailed over the rocks. By suddenly rounding the shoulder of the rock, sheltering Omega and Thalma, its head held high, it seemed not to have seen the two humans, for its terrible unblinking eyes were fixed ahead on the water. However, Omega, paralyzed with fear and astonishment, and being directly in the beast's path, believed that his hour had come. This was to be the end of all his plans—to be crushed by the enormous weight of the monster which challenged his right to live. But in that tense moment when he thought that it was all over, the lithe form of Thalma reached his side and in a frenzy of terror pulled him away. But even then the sloping belly of the onrushing beast tore him from her frail hands and dashed him against the rock.

While he lay there stunned and unable to move, Thalma discharged her weapon at the monster. Three times she fired in quick succession but the shots went wild, and in another moment the great brute struck the water with a resounding splash and disappeared from view. For a few minutes a trail of surface bubbles marked its rapid course toward the lake's center, then all was motionless and still as before.

"Are you hurt, Omega?" Thalma cried anxiously, kneeling by his side.

"Just shaken up a bit," he returned, sitting up with an effort. "Great hunters are we," he went on with a laugh. "We almost allowed the game to catch the hunters! Well, let's go back to the ship. We'll get him next time."

But their narrow escape had shaken their nerve. All day long they remained safely in the ship and kept their guns trained on the lake hoping that the beast would show himself. How or when it had left the lake they could not surmise, but that it was more formidable than they had thought now seemed certain, and Omega concluded to bring science to his aid. In this way he was sure that he would soon exterminate the monster.

So the next day he lay a cable carrying a high voltage all around the lake and connected it with traps of various designs both in the water and on the land. No more would they risk their lives hunting the beast in the open after nightfall.

The hot, still days that followed were anxious ones for these last children of life. Not a trap was sprung. The beast did not drag his slimy body and tail across the heavily charged cable. The last of his kind, fighting the last battle of existence, it seemed that nature had endowed him with uncanny cunning. There was the life-giving water for

whose possession no human kind challenged them, but this enemy was more terrible than any man, savage or civilized whom the earth had ever known.

DURING these anxious, watchful days Omega and Thalma went often to the mirror and gazed into it in search of vapor clouds. And more than once those gossamer-like formations appeared over different parts of the world to gladden their hearts only to fade away before their vision. The reflections of those embryo clouds became less frequent as the days wore on. Omega and Thalma knew that they had no right to hope for the return of water vapor. Their instruments, so finely attuned as to appear endowed with intelligence, the records of the past and their own common sense told them that. But nature and life in the upper reaches of the air were dying as hard as their own hope. They knew that the aerial manifestations they witnessed were but symptoms of the death struggle. And yet a real cloud, dark and pregnant with moisture, suddenly appeared in the mirror. Consulting the chart they saw that it was hovering over a great land of plain and mountains which formerly had been a part of the United States of America.

"We will go and examine this gift from heaven," said Omega.

"It moves over a once beautiful land, which the voices of history tell us, harbored a race of the free millions of years ago."

"Yes, we will go," agreed Thalma. "It may be after all that Alpha will first see the light far from this dreadful hollow and—and—that monster out there in the lake."

Omega hung his head. Well he knew that the presence of the monster was slowly killing his beloved. She complained not, but her dreams were disturbed with frightful visions, and often Omega awakened to find her at a window staring out over the lake with terror-stricken eyes.

This new cloud was thousands of miles to the east but with fond anticipations they entered the ship and plunged toward it. But although they reached the spot in one hour, the last remnant of vapor dissolved before their eyes, and they turned sadly homeward, once more beaten by the inexorable decrees of fate.

So having decided at last that this deep valley must remain their home forever, Omega looked about for a suitable building site, for although the ship was safe and comfortable they longed for a home on the earth. But the ever present menace of the sea-monster saddened them and filled them with misgivings, despite the fact that Omega could guard the cottage electrically. But

Omega wondered whether electric safeguards would keep this creature from coming some night to the cottage and sticking his loathsome head in at door or window. Omega shuddered at the thought, but refrained from mentioning such a possibility to Thalma.

Having selected a site under the branches of a great coral tree standing within the shade of an overhanging rock, Omega erected a cottage. It took him but a few days to build and furnish this building from supplies on the ship. It was complete in every feature, even to running water from the lake. Grass was brought from the lake and a lawn laid out about the cottage in the shadows of the rock. The grass was kept watered for Thalma's sake, even though the water was needed for other purposes and the lake was diminishing steadily. But she was sacred in his eyes—she the last mother the old earth ever was to know.

The interior of the cottage was embellished like a palace, for treasures were brought from the airship to grace its walls. The richest rugs, curtains, tapestries and silks the world had ever known were there for Thalma's pleasure and comfort. Paintings of green verdure, of forests and plains of waving grass, of tumbling mountain streams and cool, placid lakes, Omega drew

from the young days of the earth. The power to portray nature's moods and beauties had increased in many men with the passing of time. He placed these scenes before Thalma's couch that their cool and inspiring presence might comfort her while she awaited the coming of the child.

ONE morning being weary of the stark monotony of the valley, whose eastern wall was distant many miles, Omega and Thalma determined to scale the heights above. For sometimes in the sinister aspect of the chasm's walls, it seemed that the rocks would close together and crush out their lives. They concluded not to take the air-car, but to go on a rambling picnic with the ever present hope that they might discover another oasis of life.

Hand in hand they rose into the air, up and up for miles past frowning cliffs and dark caverns, yawning like grinning skulls above the outposts of death. There was no visible effort in their flight. They but took advantage of nature's laws which man had long understood. At last on the highest peak they paused to rest on a dust-covered rock.

The red sun rose above the cheerless horizon and blazed on them from a deep azure sky slashed across by bars of purple

and gold. More than nine miles beneath them spread the deep gorge, where nestled their little home, looking like a doll-house, and above it shone the great, silver ship. The lake shone like a speck of silver on the drab rocks. They gazed down upon it in an attitude of worship, for it alone in all that vast realm of peaks and plains and valleys symbolized life. Then suddenly a dark speck appeared on the surface of the lake. Omega looked at Thalma apprehensively, for well he knew the meaning of that speck. Her face was pale and drawn, and she clung to Omega as they pointed their glasses at the water.

The monster was again disporting himself. He threshed the water into foam with his long, sinuous body, while his head wagged and his terrible eyes looked toward the land. It was the first sight they had had of him since the night he almost killed Omega.

"Look!" breathed Thalma, "it is coming ashore. Oh, I did hope that it was dead!" And trembling violently she clung closer to her lord.

"Never mind, dear," consoled Omega as he watched the great beast waddle toward the shore. "We will get him this time," he went on exultingly. "Watch—he is going to get into the trap!"

But they were again doomed

to disappointment. Within a few rods of the shore, with its great, spotted body nearly all out of the water, the monster stopped, lifted its head and looked slowly around in every direction. Then apparently scenting danger, it turned, floundered back to the center of the lake and submerged.

"I—I—am afraid," shuddered Thalma.

"There is nothing to fear," reassured Omega. "The beast cannot get to our home, and one of these days he will either get caught in a trap or we will get a shot at him."

Although Omega spoke bravely he was really worried about the beast and the influence it was having on Thalma. He realized that he must at once devise a better method of extermination. Even though he did not fear it so much personally its presence was disturbing, and it was daily absorbing so much water needful for themselves.

THIS great gash in the earth's crust stretching for many miles below them had been the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean when its blue waves still lapped the shores of continents, and that little lake, far down in the earth's bosom, was the pitiful remainder of that once mighty sea. Far to the north-west, showing plainly against the sky in the focus of their binoculars, were

great ridges of mountain and table land, rising gaunt and desolate from the ancient bed of the sea—the site of the ancient empire of Japan. Round about them on every hand were the mute remains of marine life, for the spot where they sat had been far below the surface of the sea. Silent, mysterious, hopeless and dreary, the prospect appalled even their stout hearts. How they yearned for the sight of some living thing there upon those high peaks. Silence supreme and dreadful, in which even their voices, hushed and tremulous, sounded profane, cowed them by its unending solemnity and the relentless grip. Gray and nude save for their pall of dust the mountains rose into the sky, eternal in their ghostly majesty. And the dark valleys between with their gray lips of death looked like the gaping mouths of hell.

"Death! death! eternal and triumphant death, thou art everywhere!" cried Omega, springing up and gazing with hopeless eyes about over the desolation.

Thalma rose and touched his arm. A smile of faith and confidence shone on her face. He looked at her in wonder.

"Nay, death is not everywhere," she reproved gently. "Remember Alpha, our son. In him life does and will live again."

"Forgive me, Thalma," said Omega, taking her in his arms.

"You speak truly. With your loyalty and courage I know we will win."

And so as it had always been from the beginning of time, even so in these last days it took woman's love and devotion to sustain man.

Now Omega gazed around on the abode of death with an expression of disdain. He challenged it and dared it to do its worst. Life still triumphed, for he had Thalma and Alpha was coming soon. He would not surrender. He would fight the dark forces of death—even that horrible monster down there in the lake—and conquer them all. He would again 'gardenize' the world. The stubborn power of hope, that heritage from his atavistic ancestors, was surging through his blood.

"We will change all this," he went on, waving his hand toward the far rim of the sky. "We are still masters of life. But now let us descend," he added in answer to her approving smile.

So saying again hand in hand they stepped off into space and floated easily down toward their last home.

Omega knew that his first important task was to get rid of the beast. The fear-haunted expression in Thalma's eyes brooked no delay. Accordingly they went to the ship, and each taking a small sack they filled them with depth

bombs. Thus armed they floated out over the lake in quest of their enemy. But although quite shallow the water was opaque for the most part being discolored by vegetable matter stirred up by the monster, and the transparent portions were too deep for them to see bottom. Long and carefully they searched at a safe distance above the water, but no sight of the beast could be seen. Then hoping that a chance shot might reach and destroy him they passed to and fro over the lake's center and dropped their bombs. Great columns of water were sent high in air deluging them with spray. That was all. Still, they had no way of knowing whether a bomb had struck home. In spots the water was so violently agitated as to suggest that the monster writhed in a death struggle. But at last all became as quiet as before.

IT now occurred to Omega to surround the lake with an invisible wall of electricity of such power as to electrocute the beast should he attempt to go over or through it. This was accomplished by increasing the power of his motors and by automatic controls projecting a high voltage potential through the air around the lake. And then in addition to other protective appliances already installed Omega put a similar wall about the cot-

tage, much to Thalma's relief and delight.

One night they had retired early, Thalma being weary and her time but a few weeks away. To the sweet strain of music which had been in the air for ages, they soon fell asleep. How long he had slept Omega could never guess, but he was awakened suddenly. He sat up bewildered and stared into the darkness, because for some reason all lamps were out. And then he became aware of a peculiar sound coming from afar. It was a queer noise combining the roar of the surf upon a rock-bound coast, the sigh of the night wind through a forest and the rumble of thunder. Suddenly it seemed to him that earth and cottage were trembling, and the walls of the room swayed and buckled as though smitten by a great wind.

Frantically he rubbed his eyes, convinced that it was all a dream. But the noise drew nearer, thundered in his ears. In terror he got to his feet, tried to cry out. The words froze on his lips, for just then the wall before him crashed in as though struck by an avalanche. Then came a grinding, splitting jumble of sounds, the solid ground shook under the passage of some mighty force which increased for a moment followed by a piercing scream.

Frozen with horror Omega stared around the wrecked room

whose tottering walls seemed about to fall upon him. Where was Thalma? In a frenzy he stared into the darkness, felt over the couch. She was gone!

In some way he got outside and there in the direction of the lake he saw the monster, its great bulk looming high above the ground, its head swaying with the swing of its legs as it lumbered along. And, merciful God—held in the grip of the monster's jaws was Thalma!

The awful sight galvanized Omega to action. With a hoarse scream he launched himself at the beast, passed rapidly through the air above the monster and reached out for his wife. Scream after scream rent the still air as he pressed forward and the beast lurched on in its haste to reach the lake with its prey. But now Omega was close to his beloved, and he reached out to grasp her as once more he screamed right into the ears of his enemy. Then perhaps in sheer terror at the audacity of man, the great jaws of the monster relaxed and Thalma fell limp and unconscious to the ground.

As the beast lumbered on Omega knelt by her side.

"Thank God," he breathed, "she lives!"

Then he took her in his arms and turned back to the ruined home just as a great splash informed him that once more the

monster had entered his element to challenge them for its possession.

THALMA soon revived, but she clung to Omega and gazed about fearfully. How she had wandered out of doors and had been snapped up by the beast she could not tell, but Omega said that she must have been walking in her sleep. They went at once to the ship and there spent the remainder of the night.

Every light, including those about the Mirror, had been extinguished by the beast breaking the circuit. Yet it appeared that the later's passage through the electric wall had caused no harm. Omega explained that likely its bony scales had acted as an insulator against the action of the invisible wall.

While the cottage was being repaired they remained on the ship. But despite their recent harrowing experience, they went back to the cottage when the repairs were complete. It was more home-like than the ship, and Thalma had learned to love it, for it was to be the cradle of a new race. But before they again took up their residence there Omega had erected a high fence around the cottage yard. This fence was built of heavy cables securely fastened to huge posts, and each cable carried an electric charge of 75,000 volts. Omega was con-

fident that the beast could never break through. His confidence was shared by Thalma, but as an additional precaution she suggested that Omega place a similar fence about the lake. He did so, and when the last cable was in place they stood back and surveyed the work with satisfaction.

"We have him now," exulted Omega. "He can never leave the lake alive, much less reach the cottage. Despite his tough armor of scales this high potential will penetrate to his vitals."

"It is well," said Thalma as they turned away.

As they neared the cottage they knew that a crisis was at hand. Forgetting the dead world about them and subduing the fears that sometimes clutched their hearts, they lived in the joy of anticipation and made ready for the advent of a new soul.

Night came down moonless and dark save for the light of the stars. In the recesses of the rocks and in the bottoms of the valleys intense darkness held sway. But the grounds and the home of Omega and Thalma were ablaze with a thousand lamps, and on the near-by hillsides giant searchlights, which seemed to have no basis, which were born in the bosom of the air and blazed without visible cause, shot their rays into the sky for miles. Yet the powerful lights about the cottage were so tinted as to be

restful to the eye. Thus silent and with clock-like regularity the agents of Omega performed their functions. Man had mastered all the elements of life. All were his friends and servants, and none was his master save one—death.

In a perfect setting and exactly at the time set for the event Alpha came into the world, the child thrived from its first intake of earth's air.

Three weeks from birth Alpha partook of solid food in tablet form drawn chiefly from gaseous sources. At two months his speech was perfect, and at six months his education began. By glandular control Omega nurtured both his body and his mind and developed them rapidly. Small wonder that this child—the last to grace and bless the world—became his parent's only joy and hope. They guarded him from all dangers, instructed him in the great part he was to play in the world's future and set about to conserve that element on which all depended—the waters of the lake.

BUT during all these long, hot days and frigid nights, the close proximity of the monster cast a shadow over their souls, marred their happiness by day and terrorized their dreams by night. Often, when the sun beat down upon the lake, they saw his hideous head rise high above the

water and regard them with baleful eyes. Twice while at play Alpha had seen him and had run screaming to the protection of his mother, who had great difficulty in persuading him that there was no danger. This seemed to be true, for the monster made no attempt to force the fence. Endowed with more than the cunning of its remote progenitors, it seemed to realize that it was trapped. Many nights Omega and Thalma, armed with their ray guns and other implements of destruction, watched for the beast to attempt to come on land. Sometimes he would raise his head and look at them so long and steadily that icy chills ran along their spines and their hands shook so that they could not sight their weapons and therefore shot wild. Then the head would sink out of sight again.

Secure as they felt against his horrible presence it finally began to sap their courage. Besides, the lake fascinated Alpha, now but three years old but large and strong. He loved to wander by its shore and dabble in the water, but so long as the beast remained, an ever present danger was in this play. Besides there was the fear that he might escape the watchfulness of his parents and come in contact with one of the high tension cables.

And then Omega determined to

try another plan—he would electrically charge the water of the lake. He hoped that this would reach the monster in his watery lair and kill him instantly. So he constructed two giant magnets and placed one on each end of the lake. Then harnessing all the electrical energy at his command he sent a tremendous current through the water with high potential, alternating it at ten second intervals for an hour.

Two weeks later he watched for the carcass of the beast to rise. He felt now that his problem was to get rid of it so that it would not pollute the water, but it did not appear.

With fear and trembling Omega observed that the water of the lake was receding inch by inch. Then by chemical action on the coral beds and on the rocks, he created a dense cloud and caused it to form over the lake, thus in a measure protecting it from the sun's rays. But day by day, despite the sheltering cloud, the water receded. Day after day Omega moved his gauges hoping against hope that somehow and somewhere nature would again awaken and bring water upon the earth.

During all these days and months the monster did not raise its head above the surface of the lake—Omega was certain of this, for had the water been disturbed ever so little his water seismo-

graph, as well as his cameras, would have recorded it. The monster was dead at last and they were profoundly thankful. They were the undisputed masters of the earth's last water! Now Alpha could play about the shore and swim in the shallow water in peace and safety. So the dangerous fence was removed.

OMEGA knew that in the beginning the Creator had made man master of his own destiny. He had endowed him with reason and given the earth into his keeping. Omega thoroughly understood the Ruling Power of the universe. He read aright His commands, blazoned across the breasts of billions of worlds, and by the same token he knew that humanity on earth was doomed. Yet he was urged on by that unconquerable spirit which had made man king of all. He set up his rain-making machinery with the smile of a fatalist. For hundreds of miles its sinuous beams sprang into the sky, writhed about like great, hungry serpents with their tremendous sucking and receiving maws, then coiled back to earth bringing not a drop.

But one day the Mirror again showed small, faint clouds upon its surface. They were scattered over various parts of the world and their presence made Omega wonder. There appeared to be no reason for them.

"I do not understand those clouds," he said to Thalma as he sat with her and Alpha in the shade of the coral tree. "Perhaps there are hidden places of moisture, that have escaped the receiving rays of this mirror."

"Let us go and see," exclaimed Thalma, her eyes agleam with a new hope. "Let us make another voyage around the world. Alpha has never been far from home."

"That is so," he agreed. "We will go at once."

So they entered the silver ship and sailed away over the hot, dry wastes, on and on over the cities of antiquity. The ruins of New York, London, Paris and other marts of the ancients were visited in their melancholy quest for life. But even the sites of these cities were hard to find. Only the tops of the tallest structures, such as the tip of the Washington monument and the towers of office buildings stood above the ashes and sands of centuries. But not even the shadow of a cloud was seen. Still they sailed on—even skirted the dark wastes of the poles and stopped in deep valleys to test for water. Twice around the equatorial regions they voyaged in search of a new and better haven, but in vain. The insistent cry for water burned in their souls and led them back to the little lake—the last sop nature had to offer the remnant of her children.

ALTHOUGH the days were still hot and blistering, the nights were cold, ice often forming on the lake near the shore and lingering until touched by the advancing sun. Omega understood, and again a cold fear clutched his heart. Unless by some miracle of the heavens sufficient moisture should come back to the earth, no human soul could long endure the heat of the day and the freezing temperature of night.

To still further conserve the precious water of the lake, Omega now extended the folds of the cloud curtain down to its shores thus completely enclosing it. And as this further reduced the evaporation to a remarkable extent the hopes of Omega and Thalma took on new life. Here they visioned Alpha and his children living and dying in peace, now that the monster was no more. With the help of additional safeguards Omega reckoned that the water might be made to last many more years, and, before it could become wholly exhausted, some whim of nature might again shower the earth with rain.

Now to pass the time—for there was nothing to do except to direct the appliances about them—this last trio of mortals loved to leave the shelter of the cottage, now that they had nothing further to fear from the sea monster, when the westering sun

was low, and ramble among the shadows of the cliffs and commune with the past, until the chill of night drove them indoors. Sometimes sitting there in the dusk Thalma and Alpha would listen to Omega's rich voice as he recounted an epic story in the life of long ago. So to-day seated together on a cliff above the airship, they watched the sun descend. Thalma and Alpha had asked for a story, but Omega refused. For some time he had sat silent, his great, brilliant eyes on the flaming sun as it sank toward the rim of the earth. A great loneliness had suddenly seized him. He recognized it as a presentiment of disaster. It was beyond the analysis of reason, but for the first time in his life he longed to hold back that sun. Somehow he feared the advent of the night. It seemed to him that before the morning light would again flood the earth a dire calamity would befall them.

"Why so sad?" asked Thalma fearfully, and Alpha, at his father's knees, looked up in wonder.

"It is nothing," replied Omega with forced composure as he caressed the boy. "Some foolish thoughts of mine. Now as it is getting chilly I think we had better go down. Oh, how I dread this awful cold which is creeping steadily and mercilessly over the world!" he added softly, his eyes lingering on the sun.

With her usual sweet smile Thalma agreed. So they rose and floated down. When they reached the floor of the valley they paused and regarded the cloud that screened the lake.

"It does well," remarked Omega. "It will make the water last into the years."

"Yes, and all for our boy," said Thalma proudly. Alpha had left them and was playing along the shore.

"It is now time that a mate for him be on the way," went on Omega wistfully. "He must have a sister, you know."

"It is true," she agreed with a glad smile.

Omega had spoken truly. Without a mate Alpha could not perpetuate the race. And so it was arranged that before the rising of the morrow's sun a new life should begin.

Science had steadily advanced the span of life. When Alpha was born Omega was two hundred years old, but that was only middle age. Thalma was twenty-five years his junior. The human birth-rate had decreased with the passing of the centuries and nature now demanded the most exacting conditions for the propagation of the human species. Thalma at her age could not afford to wait longer. Alpha's mate must be provided forthwith.

"Alpha wants to play a while before going in," Thalma con-

tinued presently. "I will remain with him."

"Very well, dear," said Omega. "I will go on and prepare dinner."

So saying he set his face toward the cottage, but before he had taken a dozen steps he was startled by a piercing scream from Thalma. He turned swiftly, then stood paralyzed with terror and amazement. Out of the cloud curtain surrounding the lake protruded the ugly scale-covered head and neck of the monster he had believed dead! And the horrible, swaying head was darting down toward the playing boy! The monster's jaws were spread wide, its black tongue was leaping out and in like lightning, the sickening saliva was dripping upon the sand, and its awful eyes were blazing like coals. And then in a twinkling the huge jaws seized the child, the head reared back, the jaws closed, stifling the lad's screams, and it started to draw back into the cloud.

BUT, after the first onrush of horror, life came again to Omega's numbed senses. He darted forward with a mad cry, and as he swung through the air rather than ran, he seized a stone and hurled it at the brute's head. His aim was true and the stone struck the great brute on the bony hood above the right eye. It did not harm, but it maddened

the monster. Hissing horribly it swung Alpha high in the air and with a fling dashed him down upon the rocks. Then with a hoarse bellow it turned upon Omega. With its first forward lunge it seemed about to crush Thalma, who was between it and its intended victim. But the sight of her mangled child and the danger to her lord roused all the latent fury and courage in her soul and made of her a fighting demon. Like Omega she grabbed the first weapon at hand—a stone the size of a man's fist—and with the hot breath of the monster in her face she hurled the stone with all her strength straight into the red, gaping mouth.

With a blood-curdling scream the brute halted, reared backward, then ran its head back and forth over the rocks. Its loathsome body threshed about in the lake, throwing water far up on the beach. Then in its contortions it wallowed up out of the lake as it swung its terrible head about in agony, all the while hissing its challenge.

Terror-stricken, unable to move, Omega and Thalma watched it and could not understand its writhings. But as it continued to writhe and groan they understood at last—the stone had lodged firmly in its throat and was choking it to death.

Then they sprang to Alpha's side. Omega gathered him up in his arms, but he saw with one agonized glance that he was dead. His skull was crushed and it appeared that every bone in his body was broken.

Omega's heart was bursting, but he did not cry out. Holding the crushed body of his son, he raised his eyes to that God who throughout the ages had hidden His face from man, and smiled a brave smile of humility and resignation. While Thalma, understanding all, looked on dumb and dry-eyed.

Leaving the monster floundering about in its death agony, they took their beloved son to the cottage and there injected those chemicals which would forever arrest decay. Then they placed him on his cot that he might be with them to the end of life. It was then that Thalma, broken in spirit, found refuge and relief in tears which have always been woman's solace and savior.

And Omega, gazing out toward the lake, saw that the monster lay still. They had won their long battle, but at an awful cost. Omega realized that the gigantic creature, probably deep in a water cavern, had been only stunned by the electric charges.

THELMA refused to be comforted. Day after day she wept above the lifeless form of

her boy. All Omega's words of consolation, all his reasoning and faith in the wisdom and justice of all things, failed to sooth her torn heart. Nor did the promise of another child, rouse her from her sorrow. She steadfastly refused to consider another child. Life had lost its last hold on her soul, and now she was ready to surrender to that cruel fate which had given them mirages of promise and mocked their misery. In vain Omega explained that it was their duty to fight on; that they, the last of a once noble race, must not show the white feather of cowardice. He mentioned the great consolation they had of having their beloved son ever near them, though lifeless. But Thalma longed for the presence of the soul, for those words of endearment and love that had thrilled her mother heart.

Before the embalmmnt it would have been possible for Omega to restore life to his boy. Man had mastered all the secrets of biology and life. He could have mended the broken bones and tissues, revitalized the heart and lungs and cleared the brain. Alpha would have walked with them again. But his personality would not have been there. That mysterious something, men call the soul, had fled forever, and so far mankind had not been able to create its counterpart. To have brought life again to Alpha

would have been a travesty on the brilliant mind they had known. Omega recalled many pathetic examples of such resuscitation where the living had walked in death.

Omega foresaw the end, but he smiled in the face of it all. He was the same kind and loving companion Thalma had always known, her every want his command and law. But no more she realized its inspiration and love. He seldom left her side any more, but sometimes overcome with sorrow he would soar up above the peaks and commune alone with the past.

So to-day he had risen higher than usual. The red sun beat upon his body as he hovered in the hot air, his eyes fixed on the distant sky line. He gazed like a famished animal, for it seemed to him that at last a cloud must appear above that hopeless shore of land and sky and bring renewed life to him and his. Yet he fully realized the impossibility of such a thing. Slowly his great, dark eyes roved around the horizon. He loathed its dreary monotony, and still it fascinated him. Beyond that dead line of land and sky lay nothing but ghastly death. His many voyages in the airship and the reflecting Mirror told him that, but still he hoped on.

When at last he glided down to the cottage the sun was low.

Having registered the time in his mind when he left Thalma—for countless generations man had dispensed with time-keeping devices—he realized that he had been gone just three hours. Reproaching himself for his negligence he entered the doorway, then stared aghast.

Upon Thalma's wide couch facing a painting of the ancient, green world, she had placed the body of Alpha, then lain down by his side. Her glazed eyes were fixed upon the picture, and for the first time in many weeks there was a smile about her lips.

Omega knelt by her side, took her cold hands in his and feverishly kissed her brow. With a grief too deep for tears he smiled at death, thankful for the love she had borne him. Nor did he censure the Plan of the Creator, the Plan that had led him, Omega, scion of the world's great, up to the zenith of life and now left him alone, the sole representative of its power. Thalma had passed on, and in the first crushing moments of his agony Omega was tempted to join her. Without effort and without fear or pain, his was the power to check the machinery of life.

CRUSHED and broken, Omega sat by his dead, while the shadows of night entered the valley and wrapped all in their soft embrace. When would his own

hour strike? He might retard or hasten that time, but the real answer lay in that little lake out there under the stars, daily shrinking despite the cloud curtain. There was nothing more to live for, yet he determined to live, to go down fighting like a valiant knight of old, to set an example for the sons of other worlds.

But despite his brave resolution his grief for a while seemed likely to master him. Heart-broken he finally went out into the cold dusk and gazed up at the heavens appealingly.

"Alone!" he whispered as an overwhelming sense of his isolation tore his spirit. "Alone in a dead world—the sole survivor of its vanished life!"

He slumped to the ground and buried his face in the cold dust. His thoughts were jumbled in a maze of pain and sorrow. He could neither pray nor think. Gasping, dying a thousand deaths, he lay there groveling in the dust. But at last he rose, dashed the dust from his eyes and again faced the sky. He would accept the cruel mandate of nature. He would live on and try to conquer all—even death.

He cast his eyes along the shore of the lake, and there in the starlight loomed the form of the dead monster which, but for Thalma's unerring aim, would have been the last of earth's

creatures. Omega sighed and turned back to his dead.

But despite his resolution to live the loneliness was sapping Omega's spirit. During the following weeks in a mood of recklessness and despair he allowed the cloud curtain to dissolve above the lake. Once more the sun's hot rays poured down unhindered and the lake receded rapidly.

As time went on Omega grew more restless. Only by taking many voyages around the world was he able to endure the appalling silence. He was the last traveler to visit the ancient marts of man, he was the last hope and despair of life. Sometimes he talked aloud to himself, but his words sounded hollow and ghostly in that deep silence, which only added to his misery.

And then one day in a fit of desperation he rebelled. He cursed the fate that had selected him to drink the last bitter dregs of life. In this desperate frame of mind he evolved a daring plan. He would not drink those dregs alone!

IN the chemical laboratory of the ship were all the elements of creative force and life known to man. From the four corners of the earth they had been garnered, and some had come from sister planets. Here were the ingredients of creation. For thou-

sands of years man had been able to create various forms of life. He had evolved many pulsing, squirming things. He had even made man-like apes possessing the instinct of obedience, and which he used for servants, and much of his animal food also had been created in this manner.

Being skilled in all branches of biology and chemistry Omega would create a comrade to share his long wait for death. So he set to work and the task eased the pain in his heart. He placed his chemicals in the test tube and watched the cell evolve until it pulsed with life. Carefully nursing the frail embryo he added other plasmas, then fertilized the whole with warm spermatozoa and placed it in the incubator over which glowed a violet, radio-active light.

The young life developed quickly and soon began to take form within the glass walls. In a month it half-filled the incubator, and at the end of six weeks he released it, but it still grew amazingly.

At first Omega was appalled by the monstrosity he had created, for it was a loathsome, repulsive creature. Its head was flat and broad and sat upon its sloping shoulders without a connecting neck. Its legs were short, but its arms were long, and when standing erect it carried them well in front of an enormous

torso. Its short hands and feet were webbed like those of a duck. It had no visible ears, and its nostrils were mere holes above a wide, grinning, thin-lipped mouth, which was always spread in a grin. Its large, round, red eyes had no gleam of intelligence, and its hairless skin, covered with minute, sucker-like scales, lay in loose, ugly folds across its great chest. Most of its movements were slow and uncertain, and it hopped about over the floor like a giant toad, uttering guttural sounds deep within its chest. Omega had set out to create an ape-man, but this thing was neither man nor beast, bird or reptile, but a travesty on all—an unspeakable horror from the dead womb of the past.

Yet hideous as this creature was Omega looked upon it with a certain degree of gratitude. It was a companion at least, and it seemed to reciprocate the respect of its creator by fawning upon him and licking his hand. Its red tongue always hung from its slavering mouth like that of a panting dog. Omega named it The Grinner, because of its habitual and ghastly smile. He took it to the cottage that it might wait on him through the long hours of solitude. That night it slept by his side, content and motionless. But the next morning after this first night of incongruous companionship Omega

was awakened by its stertorous breathing and the touch of a cold, clammy sweat which was oozing from its pores and dropping upon the floor.

Throughout the day Omega marveled at this phenomenon. He noticed that the weird thing went often to the drinking fountain and wrapped its tongue about the water jet. That night he awakened at midnight to find The Grinner gone. He did not bother to look for him and mid-forenoon he returned. His rotund form seemed to have grown even larger, and as he ambled about on all fours the sweat trickled from his repulsive skin and trailed across the floor. It was a strange thing and Omega was at a loss to account for it, but his wonder was eclipsed by his appreciation of The Grinner's companionship. The Grinner was often absent for hours at a time, but he always returned of his own free will. Omega often saw him ambling among the rocks or stretched out in the sun on the beach. He formed the habit of letting him have his way, which was that of extreme laziness. But during all this time he was growing prodigiously. In three months he had become a monster weighing well over half a ton, but he still retained his amiable nature and affection for his master.

OMEGA seldom left the cottage. Determined to live as long as possible—for the age-old urge of life still persisted—to do nothing to hasten his end, he, nevertheless, was doing nothing to defer it. His soul in the past, he desired only to be near his dear ones. For hours he would sit gazing on their peaceful features, pouring into their heedless ears the love songs of his heart. Living for them, patiently awaiting the day when he, too, could enter into rest, he paid less and less attention to The Grinner, only noticing that he grew more horrible and repulsive as his size increased.

Lonely and despondent Omega at last left the cottage only to go to the airship for supplies. He seldom even looked toward the lake. It was a long time since he had walked about its shores, but one afternoon the impulse came to wander that way again. He was amazed that the water was disappearing so rapidly. The body of the monster now lay more than fifteen rods from the water's edge, though it had been killed on the edge of the lake.

With an indifferent and melancholy gaze Omega looked across the lake. Suddenly his stare became fixed and wild, like that of one stricken dumb. About twenty rods out the water was suddenly agitated as though by the movement of some great bulk along

its bottom, and then for a fleeting instant he glimpsed a dark, shining form heave above the surface, then sink out of sight before he could grasp its details.

"My God," he exclaimed hoarsely, "there is another sea monster! Likely it is the mate of the one Thalma killed. I might have known there would be a mate. We were dealing with two of the beasts all that time. And now this thing disputes my right to the water!"

Omega's face grew grim and stern as he glared out over the water and his heart-beats quickened. The latent combativeness of humanity was once more aroused in him. He had considered himself the last representative of life on earth. He should remain the last. No beast should claim that honor. He would kill it.

Then for two weeks he waited and watched for it to reappear, waited with all the terrible atomic weapons at hand, but he saw it no more. The Grinner sleeping in the sand was the only form of life to be seen, and at last he became weary of the hunt. He figured that some day he would charge the lake, but there was no hurry.

At last Omega lost all interest in the things about him. The Grinner came and went un hindered and almost unnoticed. He continued to grow, but Omega gave him little thought. Even the

treasures in the alrship had lost their lure for him. Disconsolate and hopeless, yet clinging grimly to life, he passed his time in the company of his dead.

He had not left the cottage for several weeks, when one cold morning after a sleepless night, something impelled him to go in search of The Grinner who had been absent all night. As this had become a frequent occurrence during the past two months Omega's curiosity was aroused. As he glided toward the lake he wondered why his interest in his surroundings had been aroused by thoughts of The Grinner, and once more he thought of killing that other sea-monster in the lake. The lake! He stopped and stared and stared. The lake was gone! Only a pool of an acre or two remained, and in its center, disporting himself in glee was—not the monster he was looking for—but The Grinner! The bloated creature was rolling about in the water with all the abandonment of a mud-wallowing hog.

OMEGA gazed in astonishment, then a shrill laugh escaped him. He had mistaken The Grinner for another monster of the deep. It was the last joke of life, and it was on him.

Then he realized that this grotesque child of his hands, having in its system the combined thirst of the dry ages—man, animal,

plant, bird and reptile—was sucking up the lake, absorbing it through his pores, then sweating it out only to repeat the process. Water was his element and food. From the dim, dry past had come nature's cry for water to find expression in this monster of Omega's making. That which he had created for a companion had grown into a terrible menace, which was rapidly exhausting his remaining stronghold of life. But, somehow, Omega did not care, and as he watched the monstrous thing finally flounder its way to the shore and lie down panting in the sun, he was glad that it was not another monster of the deep.

For a moment Omega's eyes rested on the drying form of the dead beast on the slope above him, then with a shudder he turned to The Grinner.

He went up close and stared into its terrible eyes which blinked back at him as its mouth spread in a leer. Already the sweat was coursing along the slimy folds of its skin and dripping off to be swallowed by the thirsty ground. It was a huge water sucker. It took water in enormous quantities, fed upon its organisms, then discharged it through its skin. Assisted by the rays of the sun it was rapidly drying up the lake.

Now, as Omega stood regarding it in awe and wonder, it

showed signs of distress. It began to writhe and utter hoarse cries of pain. Its eyes rolled horribly, its great, barrel-like body heaved and trembled, and it waved its long arms and threshed its feet upon the ground. Omega realized that it was the victim of its own abnormal appetite. With the relish of a gormandizer it had taken more of its peculiar food than even its prodigious maw could assimilate. Soon its struggles became fiercer. It rolled over and over in contortions of agony, the sweat streaming from its body, while a pitiful moaning came from its horrid mouth. But at last it became quiet, its moanings trailed off into silence, it jerked spasmodically and lay still.

Omega approached and placed his hand over its heart. There was no pulsation. The Grinner was dead.

With a sigh Omega turned back to the cottage. Although he was now alone once more, he did not care. All he had to do was to prepare himself for the Great Adventure, which despite all man's god-like achievements, still remained a mystery.

Now that the lake was almost gone it again drew his attention. The sickly grass had long since given up trying to follow the retreating water and now was only a dead and melancholy strip of yellow far back from the shore.

Every day Omega went to the little pool and calmly watched it fade away, watched without qualms of fear or heartache. He was ready. But even now, hot and weary, he refused adequately to slake his thirst. He must fight on to the last, for such was the prerogative and duty of the human race. He must conserve that precious fluid.

AT last there came a morning when Omega, gazing from his doorway, looked in vain for the shining pool. Nothing but a brown expanse of rock and sand met his view where the lake had been. Already the salt crystals were glinting in the sun. A long, lingering sigh escaped him. It had come at last! The last water of those mighty seas which once had covered nearly the whole earth, had departed leaving him alone with the dead of ages.

Hot and feverish he glided over the dry bed of the lake. Finally in the lowest depression on earth he found, in a little hollow of rock, a mere cupful of water. Like a thirst-maddened animal he sucked it up in great gulps, then licked the rock dry. IT WAS THE LAST DROP!

Omega rose, his face calm and resigned. With a smile of gratitude he looked up at the sky. The water was bitter, but he was thankful he had been given the final cup.

Then he went to the airship and shot up into the blue and on around the world in a voyage of farewell. In a few hours he was back. Reverently he set the airship down on its landing place. He was through with it now. Its usefulness was gone, its great, pulsing motors forever silent, soon to be covered with the dust of ages, he would leave it a monument to mankind. For a little while he wandered among the treasures of the ship. Sacred as they were they still mocked him with their impotency to stay the hand of death. But he loved them all. Thalma had loved them and they had been Alpha's playmates, and their marvelous powers had been his hope and inspiration. With loving caresses and a full heart he bade good bye to these treasures of his fathers, soon to become the keepsakes of death.

At last having completed the rounds he let himself out into the still air. Resolutely he set his face toward home.

The hot noonday sun, beating fiercely down on the dead world, entered the cottage and fell in a flood of glory about the couch where Omega, the last man, lay between his loved ones. His great eyes were set and staring, but on his features rested a smile of peace—the seal of life's last dream.

"The rest is silence."

THE END



THE SPECTROSCOPE

By S. E. COTTS

When Time Stood Still. By Ben Orkow. 174 pp. Signet Books. Paper: 50¢.

Even the title may be listed among the various ills that seem to afflict Mr. Orkow's well-intentioned but highly inept novel. For the whole theme that is brought home to the reader again and again throughout the story is that time does *not* stand still, that the brightest and best-adjusted people cannot accommodate themselves to a different age though it be only one or two generations later. But ignoring the title isn't enough, because there is so much else to disagree with in the theme once it is brought so ironically to our attention. I doubt strongly that fifty years (particularly the fifty described here) would be that impossible a hurdle for the mind to catch up to and make the necessary adjustments.

What Mr. Orkow has tried to write is the perfect love story.

But he himself has become so enamored of his two characters, Ned and Laura Creighton that he literally kills them with kindness. He gives them every virtue and attribute, both acquired and inherited, that his not-so-fertile brain can conceive: fabulous wealth, physical beauty, magnetic personality, brains, talent, etc. So that as far as the crisis in the story goes, it is difficult to generate any deep sympathy for the pair. On top of this, imagine the whole clothed in soap opera-y prose. All that's lacking to complete the picture is the Hammond organ in the background.

Briefly, the background of the Creightons and their problem is as follows: Ned and Laura have known and felt they were meant for each other from childhood. But before they married, they each went a separate way first in order that their marriage would be more meaningful for the denial that preceded it. Ned passed his

time being an expert architect; Laura, a top name movie star. They finally married and had two children. Then they discovered that Laura was dying of leukemia. At once, all Ned's efforts were bent toward searching out all the doctors who were authorities on the disease, and when none had any help to offer, he tried desperately to find some means of keeping her alive until a cure would be found. Surely in five or ten years—. Finally he finds a brilliant but eccentric researcher and doctor who comes from a long family tree of the same. This doctor has experimented with prolonging life through a freezing process. He is persuaded (to the tune of ten million dollars [of course, in addition to everything else both Ned and Laura are fabulously wealthy]) to lower the body temperatures of both the Creightons and not to wake them from their hibernation until a cure for Laura's condition has been discovered.

The rest of the plot complications can almost be guessed—the awakening to find that their children are older than they, the efforts to resume a natural life, the publicity attendant at their discovery. But as I pointed out (critically), they cannot adjust and they beat a final retreat back to the mountains from the world that has passed them by.

The skeleton of such a plot is not impossible in itself. Given sympathetic characters, or a more interesting world on awakening, or a strictly science-interest treatment, or a concentration on the psychological as opposed to the superficial, or a satire perhaps, such a work could be quite readable. But it is the foolish author indeed who would pick the melodramatic treatment for such a basically melodramatic subject.

Unwise Child. By Randall Garret. 215 pp. Doubleday & Company, Inc. \$3.50.

&

Brain Twister. By Mark Phillips. 144 pp. Pyramid Books. Paper: 40¢.

There are a number of interesting similarities between these two books, published only one day apart, though in terms of story development each is an individual entity, and a consecutive reading shows that each can stand nicely on its own accomplishments without any feeling of repetitiousness.

First, here is a brief plot outline. In *Unwise Child*, to the great joy of the government, a super brain has been achieved, a robot the like of which has never been witnessed before. Unfortunately, as soon as the government starts to reap much reward from such a gold-plated investment, the robot (Snookums by

name) discovers how to build bombs strong enough to destroy the world. Problem: what to do with Snookums It (He? She?) is a menace on Earth, but the government cannot bear to re-program such a golden, egg laying goose. Solution: build a space ship around the robot and transport it to a distant planet where scientists can still learn from it but the human race will no longer be threatened. The ship is built and sent into space thanks to the efforts of M. R. Gabriel, usually called Mike the Angel. He not only designed the power system for the craft, but he is called on to go along on the trip as a last minute replacement for the engineering officer. Then a new crisis erupts—one of the crew, the medical officer, is found murdered.

In *Brain Twister*, the government has discovered that there is a leakage of vital information about the new space drive from a closely guarded research site in Yucca Flats, Nevada. The leakage was brought to light in a novel way. Nearby, other scientists have been working on a telepathy machine. This marvelous, but highly experimental, new gadget cannot itself read minds or locate people who can, but by measuring shifting hormones and other biological data it can ascertain *when* other people's minds are being read. Thus in

the course of some routine tests of the machine, it is learned that the brains of the leading men on the rocket project are being picked. To Kenneth J. Malone of the FBI falls the unenviable task of finding out who this telepathic spy is. Since it obviously takes a telepath to catch a telepath, Malone's job seems impossible.

Is it just a coincidence here that closer examination reveals so many points of similarity between such seemingly dissimilar plots? Both stories involve crises facing the government, crises which are not solved by massive governmental intervention but by two individuals. Both these men are the prototype of what has become the "American folk-hero", an unbeatable (and equally unrealistic) combination of brains and ingenuity, muscles and good looks, plus an evidently irresistible attraction to the ladies (and vice versa)—a regular synthesis of Craig Rice's John J. Malone, Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, and the All-American boy. Before these paragons solve their respective problems, both plots take on the aspect of a detective-suspense story. Both of the crisis-causing agents are out of the ordinary brains (a computer and a telepath) housed in bodies with basically irresponsible personalities (a robot who is still a child in many ways and an old woman who is insane). Both

books, though not either satire or comedy have a less than serious approach and larger than life situations, plus people who purposely border on the ridiculous. And, to answer my questions as to whether these similarities are merely coincidental—both books bear the fine hand of Randall Garrett. In *Unwise Child* he is himself, and in *Brain Twister* he has combined with Laurence Janifer under the pen name, Mark Phillips. But whether he hides under a name or not, both books are fun reading.

Shards of Space. By Robert Sheckley. 152 pp. Bantam Books. Paper: 40¢.

A timid pacifistic professor of ancient history, survivor of a nuclear holocaust, who comes in conflict with a man-hating woman guarding five young ladies who are his prospective "Eves", a tailor who receives a very strange order for some clothing to be made up in incredible specifications, a prospector for goldenstone on Venus' Scorpion Desert who finds that his credit is gone when he needs it most—these are but a few of the "shards" Robert Sheckley has collected in this volume of short stories. For the most part, they form pleasant reading for Mr. Sheckley is one of the most interesting and consistently good writers working in sf today. He

controls a wide spectrum of material from humor to adventure. He even goes as far as morbidity, but since this particular sample, "The Special Exhibit," is only three pages long, it can be easily passed over (and it's just as well).

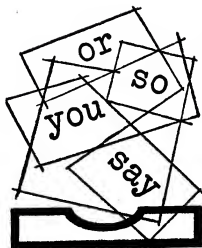
Sheckley's originality holds firm through nearly the whole volume. Only in "Meeting of the Minds," a story of an extraterrestrial intelligence whose urgency to find human hosts takes it on a long journey, do I get the feeling of "I-have-been-here-before." But even in this one, and even in the sick story mentioned before, the actual writing process is beyond reproach.

PAPERBACK REPRINTS:

Dolphin Books, *The High Crusade* by Poul Anderson, featuring one of his favorite combinations, history and science fiction. An astonishing *tour de force*, it is a good buy at 95¢.

Also of note are Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* from Bantam and *The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction* (Seventh Series), edited by Anthony Boucher, published by Ace Books.

The last ones for now are Ace Paperback Classics. All by Edgar Rice Burroughs, the titles are *At The Earth's Core*, *The Moon Maid*, *Pellucidar*, and *The Moon Men*.



Dear Miss Goldsmith:

This letter was originally prompted by a letter by Bob Adolfson in the September issue concerning politics in *sf*. If a political *sf* story is written well, I'll read it anywhere, anytime, even in **AMAZING**.

Before the sixties, your magazine was pretty mediocre—the improvement over the last three years has been truly Amazing. The covers are good but there's been an overstock of stereotyped spacesuits on them.

Byron Rogers

Manordale, Ottawa, Ont.
Canada

● *Sorry about the stereotyped spacesuits, but NASA seems to have decided on a fairly basic design. You want fashions in 'em?*

Dear Editor:

While on company business at the Cape recently, I again discovered **AMAZING**, after a five year lapse. (I must confess that my only excuse is having been too busy to read anything other than technical journals). All of the stories were good, but I would like to call a point-of-order to Mr. Philip N. Bridges letter in the 'So You Say' column.

The problem of what to term things native to Venus occurred to my associates on the Mariner Spacecraft Program some time ago. In this instance, they were not so interested in 'Venusians' (yet) as they were the atmosphere (Venustian?), topography (Venutian?), possible plant life and reproduction (Venerian?) and physical coordinates (Venustereal?). The problem was very neatly solved by one of the fellows by reverting to the Greek equivalent to the Roman goddess, Aphrodite. However, 'Aphroditian' sounded too much like a social pharmaceutical, so we finally settled on Cytherean, which, as it turned out, is more etymologically correct in that it is defined as 'of Aphrodite, hence of Venus'. Therefore, this term was officially adopted for use on the Mariner Spacecraft Program and was used to describe, for instance, 'the Cytherean atmosphere'. (the word is pronounced sith'er-e"an).

This is one instance where science fiction failed to lead the science fact. The term 'Cytherean' has caught on in the business and is being used by NASA.

This is not the only case where one word is used as a noun and another as the adjective. The Lunar Program suffers the same problem, but in a slightly different way. The 'Moon' is generally considered the noun and 'Lunar' the adjective. However, in the scientific world, widespread usage has been given to the adjective 'Selenic' or some stem of same, e.g., 'Selenographic coordinates'. This gets rather cumbersome, however, when one must speak of 'the periselene and aphselene' of a Lunar orbiter.

As an after-thought, it may be of general interest to note that the scientific world has generally accepted the term 'Martian'.

M. Richard Mesnard
Ranger Spacecraft Project
Engineer

● *Just think of the problems when we finally reach, say, the star system of Sirius. If we call the folks there "Sirians," how do you think the Terran Syrians will react?*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

This is in comment to Clay Hamlin's letter in the October AMAZING to the effect that Sam Moskowitz has been ignoring Eric Frank Russell deliberate-

ly. Now with all due respect to Clay (who has had some fine fanzine articles, including one at least discussing Russell) I think he's overlooking a few points.

Shortly before Sam began his series of articles for you there was a ballot published so that the readers could vote on the writers they most wanted as subjects for those articles. It has been my understanding that those votes were counted and used as a basis for choosing the subjects for the articles. Now most certainly Eric Frank Russell is one of the finest and most popular science fiction writers ever to appear—and certainly the most individualistic English writer. But with the number of really good science fiction writers it will take years at six a year to get to them all. Sam is doing a good job and a number of fine writers have not appeared yet as subjects of his work: Jack Vance, Edmond Hamilton, Leigh Brackett, Doc Smith . . . to name merely a few. And such a highly popular writer as Arthur C. Clarke has not been covered either. And there are technical considerations, as well. C. L. Moore is, I think, one of the best all time writers in the field, or she was until the middle forties. Kuttner, while highly popular, was never at his potential best (which was probably about the same as Jack Vance's accomplished best). Yet in no way could

you separate them. It was an absolute necessity for Sam to do two articles together on the Kuttners to get the proper perspective on both. I suspect that Russell is on Sam's list.

Jerry Page

193 Battery Pl, NE,
Atlanta 7, Georgia

● *Sam profiles Clarke in the February issue. And, one by one, we'll get around to all your favorites.*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

EEEEEEEEAAAAAGH!!!

That is the closest I can get in a letter to screaming in frustration. Not frustration at your magazine which can only be classified as excellent, but at your readers. The little messages from your fans on the letter page has become a most boring part of AMAZING. In years past I opened your magazine to the letter page first to follow the controversy and to delight in the remarks of the writers. Now the thing consists of someone writing that he classifies this story as first and that story as second or that he liked this cover and hated that one.

A while back you ran a story named "Transient." Personally I didn't enjoy it, but I'm still thankful that it was presented because it was controversial enough to pump interest into the sagging letter page.

Controversy is the key to interest—not the lame controversy such as written about Bunch in your sister magazine FANTASTIC. There fans say they like him or hate him, but give little or no reasons.

Having written thusly may I follow my advice and trade an idea which may be regarded as "way out" and I hope controversial.

Being fairly new to science fiction and AMAZING I was delighted to see your 35th Anniversary issue so that I could read some of the earlier science fiction. It was this issue which prompted me to read further the earlier style. Through this reading I discovered one fact that startled me—modern science fiction is lacking in action compared to earlier writing.

Past heroes of the stories I have read were incredible men—giants such as Conan and John Carter.

A bum, plagued by psychological problems—a weak, common man with common shortcomings that you and I can identify with is the new stereotype. And, oh yes, this bum or drunk just happens to save the world from destruction.

That doesn't stand right by me. It seems that only drunks or thieves have the inner strength to accomplish such menial tasks as rescuing the Universe. I say

this is wrong. To accomplish any great feat it takes a physical giant with a lightning fast mind, a swashbuckling hero strong enough to keep up the pace of a wild fast moving story—not a common ordinary Joe that you or I could trade places with.

In "Hunters Out of Time" Jack Odin possesses the 'giantness' like that of the romantic heroes such as Conan and John Carter. And the response to that story was overwhelming.

There may be some who disagree with what I have said—in fact I hope there are. Get your pens out and tear my letter apart—PLEASE!!

Lorne Yacuk
12107-127 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada

● *What stories have you been reading where "drunks or thieves" save the world? It's fine to argue for a return of the supermen, and some readers may agree, but we certainly can't see that the quality of all SF heroes has degenerated.*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

I would like to offer a nomination for your Profile/Reprint departments. The man I have in mind is J. R. Fearn. Few authors have contributed so much to the genre, only to be afforded scant recognition, as did Fearn. His death in 1960 even, was not re-

ported in any magazine, so far as I was aware at the time.

For myself, I have tried to obviate this oversight as best I could, having recently written three long articles on Fearn for the British Science Fiction Association's official organ, VECTOR. Further, Ed Wood is currently trying to place a bibliography and estimation for me in some U. S. fan-magazine, most likely in YANDRO. But I cannot hope to reach the wider audience I believe Fearn's work merits.

Sam Moskowitz, in AMAZING, can. His authoritative analysis and expert summations are widely read and respected.

Fearn has a very real claim. He was instrumental in the rebuilding of ASTOUNDING in the great thought-variant era of Tremaine, and when Ziff-Davis salvaged AMAZING in 1938, Ray Palmer relied heavily on Fearn for several years. As Thornton Ayre, Polton Cross, Dennis Clive, John Cotton, Ephriam Winiki, Dom Passante and others, he contributed well over a hundred stories to more than a dozen magazines in the U. S. alone. Postwar he played a vital role in introducing sf to many in this country and in Europe, and in recent years graced the Canadian Toronto STAR WEEKLY with many short novels.

It would truly be fitting if AMAZING were to honor him, and

. . . OR SO YOU SAY

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at last repay the great debt that it, and sf in general, owes to this prolific and unassuming author. What are the chances?

Philip Harbottle
27 Cheshire Gardens
Northumberland
ENGLAND.

● *Any other Fearn fans yearning to learn about Fearn? If so, we'll make it our concern.*

Dear Editor:

AMAZING STORIES has always been my favorite professional sf magazine, but I think you are really coming up in quality. For one thing, your serials are improving. Recently, you featured a three part serial by Keith Laumer entitled "A Trace Of Memory." This serial was such a startling revival of real sf in a prozine, that I have great confi-

dence as to the forthcoming material. Many have debated the usefulness of serials: I fully support them and feel that they give the prozine reader a chance to get his teeth into the issue. It is impossible for any author to fully develop character study, plot, meaning, and theme in a short 15 page story . . . hence, the need for more and more serials. I don't think your clue (or "clew") in the October AMAZING was sufficient enough to establish the actual writer of Benedict Breadfruit series, but my guesses are: Randall Garrett (Name similarity), Reginald Bretnor, and Algis Budrys . . . have I guessed correctly??

David T. Keil
38 Slocum Crescent
Forest Hills 75, N.Y.

● *R. Garrett is correct.*

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